

# APOLLO'S ODYSSEY

**PURPLE &  
ORANGE?**

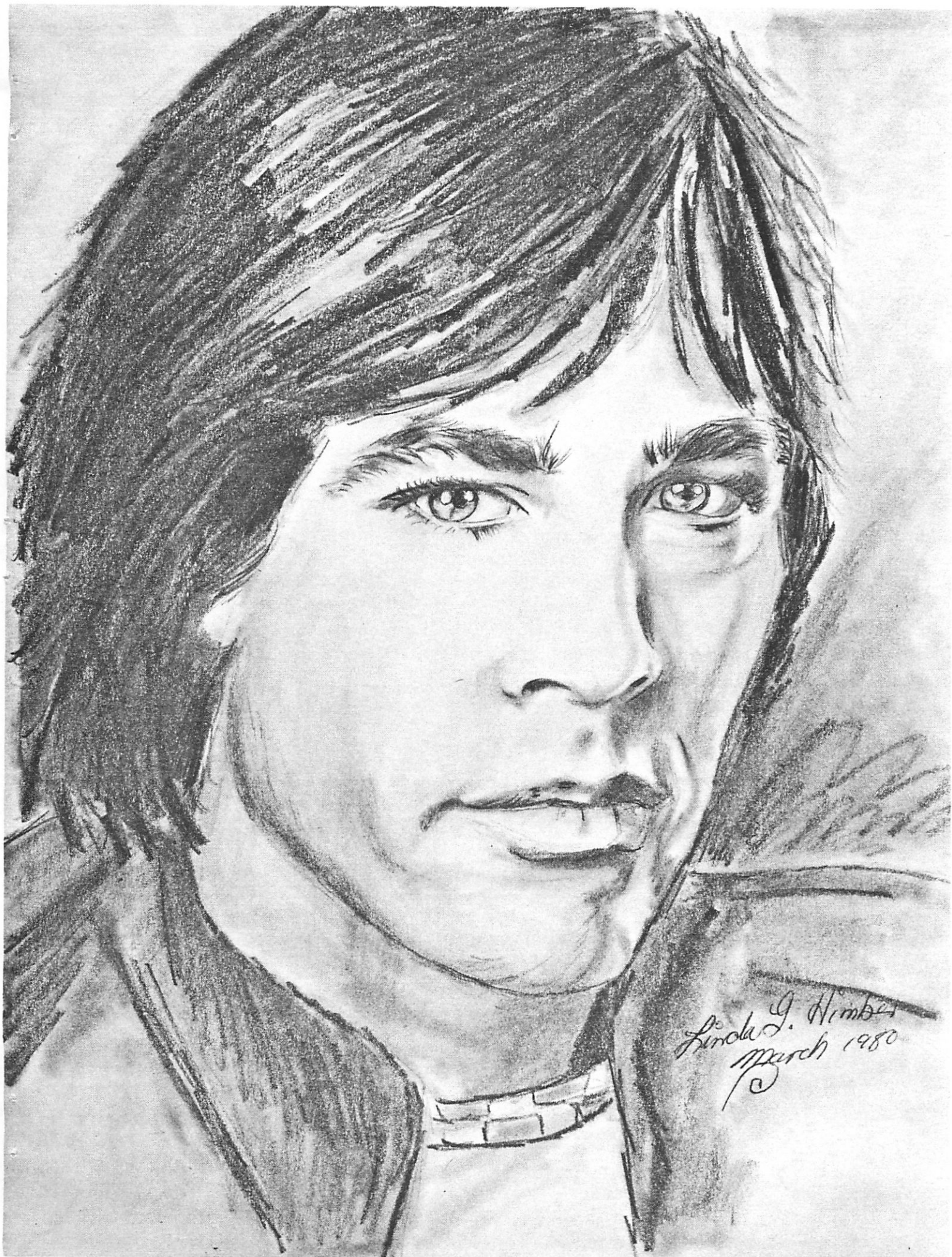


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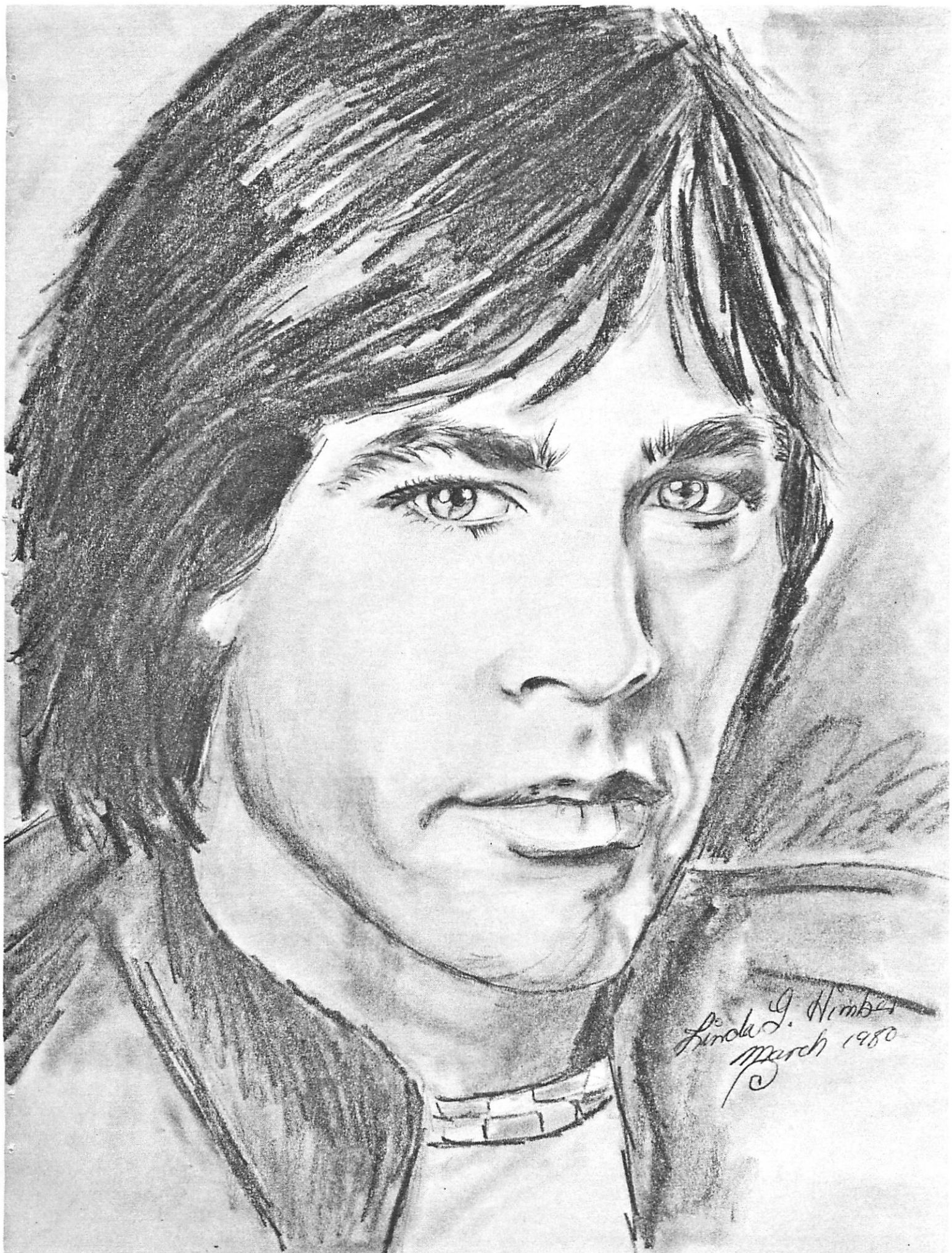
(A Story in Three Parts)

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## Introduction to APOLLO's ODYSSEY

This special issue of "Purple and Orange?" represents one possible answer to the mystery of Captain Apollo's fate between the events chronicled in "The Hand of God," the final episode of BATTLESTAR GALACTICA, and those detailed in "The Return of Starbuck," the final episode of GALACTICA 1980.

There are those who would tell us Apollo died some time during that interval. Many of these same people would also say Starbuck died on the planet he named for himself, following the second "death" of the Cylon centurion he called Cy.

"Purple and Orange?" does not -- indeed, cannot -- agree with these individuals, and we offer another -- far more plausible, far more palatable -- explanation of the Captain's fate. His family and friends may believe him to be dead, but...

We hope that you, our readers, will agree with us.



# **IBLIS' REVENGE**



## IBLIS' REVENGE

(By Joy Harrison, Marj Ihssen, and Sharon Monroe)

Apollo glanced at his instruments, then visually checked the positioning of Blue Squadron. The formation was perfect, and he turned his attention back to the star field. Flying at the head of the formation, he could see only the intense blackness of space, relieved by pinpoints of light from the distant stars.

There were times when he was glad to be away from the GALACTICA, from the pressures and responsibilities of day-to-day life. Here, in the depths of space, he could find peace, silence, a few moments to be alone with himself and his thoughts. One day, when they'd found Earth, maybe they'd be free to properly explore some of the worlds lit by those distant stars...

A sudden blip on his scanner brought Apollo back to reality. "Raiders," he warned. "Closing fast -- a lot of them." Definitely not just a casual patrol -- it looked like three, maybe four squadrons, the entire complement of a base star.

Then the Vipers were among the Raiders. Apollo noted, as he evaded the fire of one Cylon and swung away to destroy another, that the Colonial losses were running high -- too high. Something was wrong. The Raiders weren't manoeuvring normally; their reactions and movements were too quick, too sharp. He sent his Viper into a loop that nearly blacked him out, then pulled up to fire on yet another Cylon. As it vanished in a burst of flame and debris, he heard an urgent appeal from a pilot with a pair of attackers on his tail.

"Boomer! Boomer, where are you? Hey, anybody! I need help!"

Starbuck! Apollo wrenched his Viper around, knowing he'd probably be too late, but knowing he had to try.

"Boomer, Apollo... Anybody!"

Apollo could see the Viper and its pursuers. "Hang on, Starbuck, I'm coming!"

He was too late. Starbuck's ship exploded in a soundless burst of light.

"Starbuck..." Grieving, angry, despairing, Apollo fired on the second Cylon, the one who'd killed Starbuck. The Cylon died.

Apollo's Viper shuddered as Cylon fire grazed a wingtip. He pulled up and a-

round, then hit his braking thrusters, but the other ship stayed right with him. A quick check of his scanner revealed barely a handful of Vipers remaining. Laser fire came closer and closer...

An alarm klaxon ripped through the room, and the simulator systems went dead. Instantly, there was organised confusion as pilots grabbed helmets and gear and headed toward the launching bay.

"Who in Hades programmed that simulator run?" Starbuck's voice demanded over the din.

"Adama's orders," Apollo called back, remembering how he himself had been caught up in the simulation. "So we don't become, uh, complacent."

"Complacent?" Starbuck sputtered as he ran for his Viper. "Who in Hades is complacent?"

It was a rather quiet group of Warriors who gathered in the Officers' Club later. Their victory over the Cylon patrol hadn't erased the memory of their "deaths" in the simulators. Even those pilots who'd survived were aware that, but for the interruption by the real Cylons, it would've been just a matter of time before they'd been "killed," too.

When Adama and Tigh entered the Club, Tigh was quick to note the unusual mood. "They seem very quiet tonight," he commented.

"I loaded the simulator run," Adama explained.

The Colonel smiled. "No wonder."

Adama's presence seemed to cool the atmosphere in the Officers' Club, and most of the pilots soon found reason to leave. As Apollo started for the door, Adama called to him.

"I've rearranged the flight schedule," the Commander said. "Blue Squadron will stand down tomorrow. They deserve a rest."

"Yes, sir."

"And, Apollo..."

"Sir?"

"Your squadron did very well in the simulator run." Adama smiled. "Much better than the combat computer predicted."

"I'll pass that information on." Apollo hadn't enjoyed the experience much himself.

"Dismissed."

Apollo wearily headed toward his quarters. It was time he relieved Cassiopeia and got Boxey into bed. With the day off tomorrow, maybe he could spend some



time with his son; he'd been neglecting the boy.

But Apollo found Cassiopeia already gone and Boxey sprawled on his bed, listening to a story Reisa was telling. As Apollo entered, Boxey jumped up and ran to fling his arms around him.

Apollo hugged him back. "A bedtime story, Boxey?" he asked, smiling. "How'd you con her into it?"

"Starbuck came for Cassiopeia, and Reisa said she'd stay with me. Can I stay up until she finishes, Father?"

Apollo looked at Reisa, who nodded, then walked to the bed and sat down with Boxey. "Promise to go to sleep when it's over? Warrior's honour?"

"Warrior's honour," Boxey replied solemnly.

Apollo smoothed the boy's ruffled hair, then went to his desk to attend to the paperwork that always seemed to accumulate. He heard the quiet murmur of Reisa's voice as she spun her tale to an end, then her soft step as she came up behind him and rested her hands on his shoulders, her fingers gently rubbing tension from the muscles. He sighed and leaned back against the chair.

"Feels good?"

"Mmm." He relaxed for a few centons, then turned off the computer and desk light. The room was lit only by the faint glow of the stars beyond the viewport. Apollo got to his feet and stood silently, looking out, watching the oddly assorted ships of the Fleet. Reisa stood beside him, and he slid his arm around her shoulders, holding her close.

"Boxey asleep?"

"Before the story ended," she replied softly.

Apollo held her tighter as he remembered she'd once had a young son of her own, a boy who died trying to escape from Vandis.

The silence stretched into centons.

"What do you see out there?" Reisa finally asked, her voice low.

"Stars...the Fleet...life..." Apollo replied slowly, then glanced at her. "Why?"

"Oh, just thinking... That simulator run today..."

"...was just a simulator run."

"See, you're doing it, too." Apollo looked puzzled, and Reisa sighed. "It's like a game we play -- we all play. Always seeing just today, refusing to look beyond, to think..."



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Apollo digested her statement in silence for a moment. "You're right, I suppose," he admitted at last. "But it's something every Warrior learns to do. Otherwise..." He shrugged. "Hey, you're awfully gloomy tonight."

"You need a little gloom every once in a while. It makes you appreciate what you have, what..."

"Lieutenant," Apollo interrupted.

"Yes?"

"Shut up," he said, following the order with a kiss.

\* \* \* \* \*

Apollo glanced at where Reisa's Viper showed as a moving dot against the star-strewn blackness. The ships cruised stealthily, spaced apart for a wider scanning field. He yawned and shook his head -- lack of sleep was finally making itself known. He smiled then, wondering if Reisa was as tired as he, but refrained from calling her on the com to ask. All com lines on long patrols were monitored on auto recorders -- and on the GALACTICA bridge.

At a previously plotted point, the two Vipers swung around and began a sweep paralleling the flank of the Fleet.

"Anything on scanner?" Apollo asked tersely.

"Negative," Reisa replied.

Silence then, and blank scanners, until it was nearly time to turn again and head back to the Fleet. Reisa, flying slightly to the rear, noticed the strange effect first.

"Apollo, I'm picking up some sort of interference on my scanner."

"Could be a malfunc... No, I have it now, too."

"Cylon jamming?"

"Could be, but it doesn't look like their normal pattern. I'll run a check on it."

But Reisa was experiencing other problems. Her Viper began to shake around her. "Apollo, now I'm experiencing some sort of vibration."

"Me, too. Systems all operational?"

"No sign of circuitry malfunction. Must be from outside."

They both scanned visually, but could see nothing. Then a faint, piercing whistle began as the vibrations increased in intensity, becoming a high-pitched keening that quickly grew unbearable.

"Apollo..."

"I know. Turbos -- now."

"I can't... Power's...failing, systems...out..."

Apollo's controls were malfunctioning, too. He rerouted circuits, but one system after another failed. The vibrations grew, and the very air of his cockpit shivered. Pain ripped through him, driving each nerve and muscle to a tortured overload echoed by Reisa's cries over the com, until he himself cried out in soul-searing agony, mind and body driven beyond endurance.

\* \* \* \* \*

Starbuck, who was directing a cadet flight in proper landing procedures, sensed something was wrong when Boomer met him in the landing bay. "What is it, Boomer?" he asked, slinging his helmet to a crewman. A sudden premonition touched him. "What's wrong?" Boomer's face was drawn into lines of sorrow, and Starbuck's thoughts flew. "Apollo?" He turned and raced for the bridge.

The silence on the bridge was enough to confirm Starbuck's guess. Adama and Tigh stood behind Omega on the command deck, the Commander's face frozen into the stony mask he donned when faced by a painful decision. It was an expression Starbuck had seen many times in the past few yahrens. Tigh looked shaken, and several of the bridge crew seemed openly near tears.

Neither Adama nor Tigh noticed Starbuck standing near the hatchway. Their attention was centred on the recording Omega was playing back on his console.

The voices of Apollo and Reisa were distorted by static. Their barely discernable words created images in Starbuck's mind, brought back memories he'd rather have left buried. Whitefaced, he listened until the recording ended.

"No other communications were received?" Adama asked harshly.

"No, Commander, and long-range scan can detect no sign of their Vipers," Omega replied.

"Commander, if they're still out there, it's long past the time their air and fuel would have been exhausted," Tigh added unhappily.

"Lords..." Adama's sigh was barely audible. "Why, Tigh? Why now? We've come so far... After all this time, why?"

\* \* \* \* \*

Centars later, Adama sat alone at his desk in his quarters. His mind refused to concentrate on his paperwork. His ears kept ringing with Apollo's cries, his eyes seeing the shocked expressions on the crew's faces when he'd announced Apollo's...death.

Idly, he thumbed the viewing screen controls, flicking from launch bay to fire control to landing bay to ready room. It was an unusually quiet ready room.

Apollo had been, in a way, Blue Squadron's luck talisman, and Adama didn't know if their spirit would survive the loss of his son. They were singing now, but not the usual rowdy refrains. Instead, the com echoed the haunting melody of the "Warriors' Prayer."

Oh, Lords of Kobol, hear our prayer  
For those who've fought and not returned.  
We pray that we will always be  
Worthy of their great sacrifice.

Tears gathered in Adama's eyes.

\* \* \* \* \*

A grimly determined Starbuck stowed his flight gear and an extra laser in the shadows by the turbo shaft and strolled toward his Viper. He'd joined the other pilots in the ready room, to sing his friends into the final silence, but the words stuck in his throat. His mind kept hearing the tortured voices from the recording, seeing the memories those voices raised. Thank the Lords, his ship was in launch position.

"Hi, Ortal. How's she doin'?" Starbuck asked the figure crouched under a wing of the scarred machine.

"Everything's primed and ready to go," Ortal replied. "You're on long patrol tomorrow, you know, and..." The mechanic never saw the blow that knocked him out.

Starbuck carefully dragged Ortal into a corner, then grabbed his gear, tossed it into the cockpit, and dove underneath the Viper's wing. "I sure hope I remember this right," he muttered to himself as he quickly wired a bypass to Core Control.

\* \* \* \* \*

Adama was determinedly attempting to clear some of the paperwork from his desk when Tigh called from the bridge.

"Commander, one of our Vipers has just launched without clearance."

Adama felt a ripple of premonition. "Whose?"

"The pilot refuses to answer, sir, but the launch bay confirms it's Starbuck's ship, and his gear is missing."

"Starbuck..."

"Shall I send a patrol after him?"

"No, Tigh," Adama answered wearily. "I think I know what he's doing. I may not approve of his methods, but I won't try to stop him." He closed the circuit and leaned back. Starbuck... There was no hope, no way... There hadn't even been any star systems within Viper range, but...

Starbuck had taken any decision out of his hands. And, maybe... Against all logic, hope began to grow in Adama's heart.

\* \* \* \* \*

The pain had somehow become so great it no longer registered. Nothing registered. It was as if he floated in a grey, formless void apart from his tormented body. At his side, Apollo could somehow sense Reisa. She was as lost as he, yet somehow aware of him, too.

He fretted a moment, as a memory of this place flashed through his mind, but the thought was driven out by lethargy and timelessness.

The peace was shattered abruptly. Seeming to come from all directions, evil laughter chilled Apollo and froze the greyness around him, holding him immobile.

"Ah, Captain Apollo, we meet again."

Apollo knew that voice, knew it from countless nightmares of death and dying. "Iblis!"

"Yes, that is the name you knew me by. You shall not defeat me this time, Captain." The greyness began to take on the form of Iblis as Apollo remembered him. "Once before, you thwarted me, Captain, but not this time. This time, I shall claim what is mine."

Reisa stirred at Apollo's side. "You have no dominion over us! We defy you!"

Iblis merely paused and smiled. "You can still die."

"This much I remember, Iblis. You have no right to our lives unless we give you that right. You were punished once before for taking what wasn't yours to take." Apollo struggled to hide how much that memory -- a memory of his own death -- shook him.

"Yes, it was...inconvenient. You have cost me much, Apollo, and I will have my revenge. There are many ways to die, some very long, very painful. Or I might let you live, only to wish you had died." Iblis laughed again, and as he vanished, Apollo and Reisa found the agony of their bodies returning. Then reality, too, returned.

Apollo forced himself to raise his head, fighting the pain and dizziness that threatened to bring unconsciousness again. Before him swam a dull brown planet, lit by a bloated red sun. The Vipers were headed for it at full throttle. Shakily, Apollo reached out his arm, wincing slightly at the pain. His controls responded sluggishly. As his vision cleared, he noticed cracked glass, broken instruments, panels hanging from spitting wires. Off to his left, he could see Reisa's Viper, badly scarred and damaged. It would be a miracle if they landed in one piece.

Instrument after instrument, control after control, failed. The Vipers' entry into the turbulent atmosphere nearly became an uncontrolled plunge to fiery



death. Buffeted from side to side, fighting the wind and nursing their faltering braking turbos, Apollo and Reisa gradually approached the planet's surface.

The two Vipers dipped, searching for a clear stretch among the canyons and eroded mountains below them. As Reisa's ship sputtered on its last traces of fuel, they found a semi-clear valley near the edge of a mountain chain. A desperate dive; a sliding, skidding landing that jarred already overstrained systems and bodies; a final crunch as the underbraked Vipers reached the edge of the sand and crashed into a rock ledge; then silence. Sandy dust settled over the ships, and metal popped as it cooled; inside the Vipers, both pilots lay senseless, the battering they'd taken claiming its price.

\* \* \* \* \*

As his Viper streaked across space, Starbuck busily fed numbers from a scribbled piece of paper into his course computer. He readjusted the course and increased the speed, then settled back. No one was coming after him, and he'd soon be beyond scanner range. True, his calculations revealed a very tricky fuel situation -- if he stayed too long or had to go too far, he might not make it back to the GALACTICA.

"Buddy, you've got to be out of your mind!" Starbuck muttered to himself. But his determination never faltered. He checked around him, but it was too soon; he was still too far to see anything, if there was anything to see. If...

He let his mind range back to that frozen moment on the bridge. The images created by the distorted recording matched all too closely his own memories of another time. The screaming pain, the intense, high-pitched sound -- it was all too familiar. A feeble hope, perhaps, but Starbuck had been through too much with Apollo, owed him his life too many times not to grab the most fleeting chance, the smallest hope. If there was a "ship of lights" -- those same beings who'd picked them up when he and Sheba were taking Apollo's body back to the GALACTICA -- then...

Memories crowded in. The Academy days, good and bad, teamed with Boomer and then Apollo. The triad circuit, where they were nearly unbeatable. Being stationed together on the GALACTICA, fighting Cylons together. Then the "peace," the Cylon treachery. Apollo's pain at Zac's death; his love for Serina, and his grief when he lost her. Starbuck remembered his fear when an unarmed Apollo faced a delirious pilot armed with a laser, simply not caring if he lived or not; panicked, Starbuck stunned that pilot himself.

He remembered Reisa, too -- how she arrived piloting a freighter carrying the few survivors from Vandis. Used to a command of her own, she wasn't able to do anything except irritate Apollo. Her drive was much like his in those days -- her husband dead, she desired only to join him, and to take as many Cylons with her as possible. The chances Apollo and Reisa took kept both Starbuck and Boomer scrambling just to keep them alive.

Then, somewhere in their pain and grief, Apollo and Reisa found a common ground. A comradeship was born and, in time, in each other, a reason to live again...



Starbuck suddenly came alert as a faint whisper of sound penetrated his Viper. It quickly grew to teeth-rattling intensity. Hands clamped to his ship's controls, he waited in fear and jubilation -- fear of the agony he knew was coming, jubilation at the confirmation of his hopes. There was a "ship of lights" here!

He held that thought in his mind as he receded into blackness.

\* \* \* \* \*

On a dying planet, with night casting shadows over sand and rocks, dark figures crawled onto the two crashed Vipers. Knives flashed, and two still bodies were lifted down. Hands pawed at helmets and lasers, ripped jackets and boots from limp forms. Knots of struggling bodies drifted away, fighting over their prizes. Then the crowd backed away as a white-robed, masked figure approached.

The priest surveyed the Vipers. At his command, the two bodies were stripped of all but their clothing, and everything was dumped into the wreckage. Wood was piled around the ships. Cockpit instruments were ripped out, battered into uselessness. Oily tar was poured from skin bags. Then the priest took a torch and circled the Vipers, chanting solemnly. Suddenly, with a piercing shriek, he threw his torch into the pile of wood and wreckage. As the fire grew, the crowd began to cavort and scream, dancing frenziedly, in hysteria even attacking each other.

\* \* \* \* \*

"You have sought us out, Starbuck," a figure robed in shimmering white stated. "Why?"

Starbuck gathered his hope and courage. "I seek my friends, Apollo and Reisa. Are they here? Do you have them?"

"No."

Starbuck felt stunned. He'd hoped so much, been so sure... "Then why are you here, in this spot?"

"We, too, are seeking one we have lost."

"Count Iblis!"

"Yes. We followed him here. And perhaps we do know where your friends are."

Hope grew again. "Apollo and Reisa?"

"Perhaps. When we reached this spot, we found signs of two of your ships. Their paths merged with the one we followed."

"Then Iblis has them?" Starbuck shuddered.

"We do not know. Farther on, the trail divides. One course continues through

space, another spirals planetward. This must represent the ones you seek. The planet is a place Iblis visited once before, where the people were not as strong as yours, or as wise. We found them too late, after the damage was done. Iblis fled -- but we cannot change time, and the damage remains. To send your friends to such a place would suit Iblis' twisted mind. Revenge -- death, but not by his hands."

"How do I get to this place?"

"We can send you there, Starbuck, but we cannot promise you will save them, or even that you yourself will live. The star of that system is close to extinction, and its planet will die with it. Your friends may already be dead."

"No, Apollo is alive," Starbuck stated flatly.

"Perhaps so. Your bond to him is very strong. But whether he will continue to live depends on many variables."

"Iblis couldn't kill them?"

"Wouldn't. He did not like the payment we exacted the last time he trespassed in such a manner."

"Is Iblis still there?"

"No, he has gone on, fled. What you and your friends must face is a world and a people which freely gave their souls and spirits to Iblis. And now, in their world's death, they cry out to him -- and he is gone."

Starbuck tried to imagine such a place and blanched. The ancient legends of the "prince of darkness" were cruel.

"You hesitate?" a figure in white asked. "Is the price too high?"

"No!"

"Even if that price is your life?"

"I answered that once before, long ago. My answer hasn't changed."

"Yes, Starbuck, you have indeed grown. Your race has many possibilities for the future. We will send you to the star system where your friends are to be found. From there, you will be on your own. We cannot help you -- and we have already delayed here too long."

\* \* \* \* \*

Dawn brought searing heat as the bloated sun crept into a purple sky, its light falling on two motionless, horizontally spread-eagled figures lashed hand and foot to poles set deep in rock and sand. As the sun's rays became hotter, Apollo stirred, but his first attempts to move brought agony that sent him spiralling down into blackness again.



Centars later, he awoke, gasping, as cool water splashed across his burnt face. A white-robed figure wearing a twisted mask stood over him, speaking words Apollo couldn't understand. Then someone took the water away and checked the prisoners' bonds with savage tugs; occasional blows caused the two suspended bodies to swing. The priest, followed by his attendants, scurried off to seek the coolness of the shadows.

Apollo waited until he was sure they were gone, then opened his eyes and checked for a guard. There was none. Ignoring the pain, he struggled to loosen his bonds, but his efforts only succeeded in tightening them further. He tried swinging back and forth, hoping to strain and break one of the poles, but they were too strong. Gasping, his flight suit drenched in sweat, he slumped back. Even resting, the weight of his body suspended from wrists and ankles sent pain coursing through him.

"Apollo?" Reisa's voice was a dry, rasping whisper.

"Yes."

"Where...? What...?"

"Iblis' work," Apollo grated. "Natives...destroyed our ships...hung us here to die."

"To die?" Apollo grinned at her string of Vandusian oaths. She began struggling.

"Reisa, I tried..."

"You...didn't spend...seven yahrens...on Vandis..." she gasped back.

Apollo remembered. Vandis, a mining colony on a vicious, high-gravity world. Many times, Reisa's conditioning to the high Vandusian gravity had enabled her to perform incredible Viper manoeuvres. He gritted his teeth and braced himself.

Centons later, her gyrations paid off. Leather snapped, unwinding from the common pole between their hands, and Apollo slid to the ground. He forced his deadened fingers to free his other arm. As sensation returned to his hands, he untied his feet and stumbled to where Reisa lay, barely conscious. He untied her, rubbing her hands and feet to restore circulation; then he half-led, half-carried her to the shade under a burnt-out Viper's wing.

Pushing aside rocks and burnt wood, Apollo left Reisa sitting beside a landing skid and gingerly climbed into the cockpit. One quick look confirmed his fears. The ship was beyond repair. There were no supplies; the storage compartments were empty, the instruments smashed.

He started to climb down, and a sudden quake threw him from the wing. Winded, he lay in the debris, watching the ship above him. As tremor after tremor shook the ground, the damaged skid failed; the Viper tipped, and Apollo barely rolled out of the way as it crashed sideways. He stumbled back to his feet and looked for Reisa, then found her clinging grimly to a boulder. As the

shocks faded, he joined her, and together they scavenged the other ship. Despite its greater crash damage, it hadn't been vandalised as much; they found water and emergency rations.

"Lords, what a place," Reisa murmured.

"Iblis' place," Apollo answered grimly, surveying the horizon. "We'd better move. They'll be back."

Centons later, they struck out across the sand toward the nearest mountains, picking their way carefully from shade to shade, wary of overhangs as quake after quake continued to shake the ground. They carried the remaining water in a bag made from the sleeve of a pressure suit. Both carried knives made from pieces of broken metal, and Reisa carried a long sharp-tipped rod to use as a probe. Both had packs made from pressure suits. Apollo had ripped out every spare electronic part he could find and had discovered a salvageable battery wedged deep into a compartment.

"This can't be natural," Reisa commented as they stopped to rest among some sheltering rocks. "Life couldn't have evolved like this, in this."

Apollo was sorting through bits and pieces of metal and electronics. "No, I think the star's causing this. It's dying, consuming its own planet in the process."

"Great." Reisa shook her head. "What're you making?"

"Trying to get some kind of working beacon."

"There was no system like this near the Fleet." Reisa leaned over to retrieve a bit of metal, holding it in place for him. "We'll need food soon. These rations aren't going to last."

A slithering sound came from behind the rocks, and Reisa whirled, reaching for a laser that wasn't there. A huge head, complete with compound eyes and a long slit tongue, peered around the rocks; Apollo and Reisa didn't stay to see if it was friendly. In their flight, they didn't see the bright streak of vapour as a silvery object slashed across the sky, curving toward the ground.

\* \* \* \* \*

As Starbuck flashed above the planet's surface, he saw the grounded Vipers, and his scanner still held the image as he sought the safety of altitude. The Vipers were damaged -- but not entirely from a crash. They'd obviously been the centre of a vicious ground attack, and those poles set to one side -- had they been used to bind captives?

Whoever attacked the Vipers might be drawn back by the sound of his passage. Scanning, Starbuck found a landing place in the next valley. Gliding quietly, using minimum braking thrusters, he settled his ship among the rocks and shadows.

He was right about drawing a crowd. As he topped the ridge, the crash site

below filled with screeching figures. One of them, tall and white-robed, stood by the empty poles, screaming in hysterical rage. Others threw stones and attacked the Vipers. Some began to scatter in search of the missing captives.

"Someone survived that crash, and someone obviously escaped," Starbuck observed as he crouched among the rocks. He froze as a rag-clad figure carrying a studded club appeared, searching the rocks and heading toward Starbuck's place of concealment. Drawing his laser, Starbuck stunned it; stripping the body of its rags, he bound it and laid it in the shade.

"Probably home for every bug in the system!" he swore, reluctantly donning the rags over his uniform. Using dirt to disguise his features, he shambling down to join the crowd. His translator enabled him to decipher some of the frenzied screaming.

"Find them! Find them! If they escape the sacrifice..."

"Ithon will call down the wrath of the sun! We'll die! We'll all die!"

"They are evil! All who live with machines are evil!"

"They bring the wrath upon us! Kill them! Kill them! Kill..."

\* \* \* \* \*

Apollo dragged himself over the edge of a cliff and turned to help Reisa. The heat and their battered condition had slowed their escape to a crawl. Now, looking back across the basin, Apollo could see the red light of the sun reflecting off the Vipers, and, a little closer, a moving cloud of dust. He turned back to Reisa.

"They're coming. Let's go."

"Where? Where can there be safety for us?"

"We can try to lose them up there, in the mountains. And there's a chance for water and shelter."

A long look passed between them. This place and their predicament were Iblis' doing, and their chances of survival seemed slight. Apollo straightened. He wouldn't give Iblis the satisfaction of surrender. If he was to die here, he'd die fighting.

"We fight?" Reisa asked, watching him.

"We fight."

She smiled and stood up. They made a good team, she and Apollo. To go down fighting, to take as many of the enemy with you as possible, was Warrior tradition. And there was even a slight chance of survival. Apollo's uncanny ability to sense trouble, her ranger and scouting talents, a distress beacon made from salvaged bits and pieces -- yes, there was a slight chance.

Apollo turned to face her as he finished packing the beacon, then held her close and kissed her. Curiously refreshed, they parted and continued toward the mountains.

\* \* \* \* \*

Starbuck was in the van of the mob. Fanaticism drove them without rest, until he was hard pressed to keep the pace. As night drew near, he hoped they'd stop; but torches appeared, and they pushed on. Quake after quake shook the ground, and tumbled rocks claimed several of the motley crowd -- yet they continued.

\* \* \* \* \*

Far up the mountain slope, Apollo and Reisa braced themselves against the continuing shocks. Vents opened in the mountainside, letting forth noxious fumes; once, a boiling mud slide coursed down a gully they'd climbed only centons before. As night drew near, the sky above the mountain crest was tinged with a pulsing red glow.

"Just our luck, an active volcano," Reisa remarked, probing ahead for holes in the crumbling rock.

"At least it should slow them, too." Apollo pointed toward where their pursuers' torches could be seen at the foot of the mountain.

A violent upheaval wracked the volcano. Fire broke from its crest; rock and glowing pumice rained down. Frantically, Apollo and Reisa sought the cover of a shallow cave. Lava coursed down the mountainside; pumice and ash filled the air; noxious fumes made breathing agony. The rocks grew hot enough to blister flesh, and explosion after explosion nearly brought the cave down around them.

\* \* \* \* \*

Farther down the slope, the pursuers sought safety in a mad scramble, their fear of the volcano greater than their fear of the priest. They fled, and soon only the priest and Starbuck were left. As the head tracker turned to flee, Starbuck grabbed the leash of his tracking lizard, dragging the beast up a nearby hillside to seek shelter among the rocks. The priest glared at him, screaming his rage, then turned and ran on into the falling ash and rock.

"Good riddance," Starbuck muttered. He pushed the snapping, terrified lizard deeper into safety. "You're the only chance I have of finding them up there," he told the animal. "If they survive this. If we survive this."

\* \* \* \* \*

In the morning, the mountain still shuddered in memory of its ferocity, and a tall column of smoke rose from the crater to trail across the sky. Apollo peered down the slope.

"Are they still there?" Reisa asked, trying to beat some of the dust from her clothes and hair.



"No, I don't think so. They might be back later, but I don't think anyone's there now."

Reisa nodded. She knew Apollo's ability to sense odd things; more than once, it had saved their Warriors from Cylon ambushes. Picking up her pack, she followed him as he started along the ledge outside their cave, probing for thin spots and still-molten lava.

\* \* \* \* \*

Aboard the OSIRIS probe shuttle, Arion was fuming. He'd been stuck at the controls of the orbiting shuttle for centars. The scientists he'd flown to this blasted planet had exiled him there, claiming he got in their way as they discussed gravitational stresses, vulcanism, shear planes, and other scientific gobbledygook. Morgan, who might at least have talked to him, was off in his Viper, running close data passes on the star. And Arion was stuck spending centars staring at nothing.

Idly, he keyed in the com, but Morgan was too close to the sun, and all Arion received was static. Bored, he ran up and down the communications band, but they were too far away for anyone from the OSIRIS to reach them. Then a faint squeal drew his attention.

"Morgan? Morgan?" he queried, then noticed he'd left the selector on a little-used frequency. Intrigued, he fine-tuned, then keyed in the computer. A regular pulsing signal emerged from the static, a signal he recognised -- a Colonial distress signal, something no Warrior could ignore. Somewhere on that wretched planet was a stranded Colonial ship -- or something.

"Strap yourselves in," he called to the scientists. "We're landing." As they scurried to the safety of their seats, Arion took the shuttle closer to the planet, trying to locate the source of the signal.

\* \* \* \* \*

Apollo and Reisa felt their way along the ledge, not trusting rock that, more than once, had crumbled beneath their feet. They were dirty, their hands bloody, their boots worn and cut by lava. They paused at a wide spot on the ledge and rested, carefully sipping at their precious store of water and dozing a little in the shade.

Apollo started awake, unsure what had roused him. He looked first to the volcano, but it was no more active than it had been all day. Then the piercing shriek of a ship landing brought him to his feet. A ship? Here? Someone answering his beacon? He went to the edge of the shelf and tried to see all of the valley below. His eye caught the gleam of the ship, and he missed the movement in the rocks above him. His only warning was a scream from Reisa and a violent shove that knocked him clear across the ledge.

"Apollo!" The echoes of the cry were lost in the sound of a rockfall.

Picking himself up, Apollo turned in time to see a dirty figure in torn white robes, wide-eyed, screaming, with a knife in hand, launch itself at him from

above. His frantic dodge caused the knife to pierce his shoulder, not his heart as was intended.

Apollo struggled to hold the knife away as, screaming and kicking, fingers clawing at his eyes, the priest pressed his attack, pushing the Warrior closer to the edge of the shelf. Weakened by his ordeal, Apollo began to give before the knife. Then, faking a sudden stumble, he sank to one knee and, using the priest's own momentum, threw him off the shelf to the rocks below. Apollo fell to his knees, gasping for breath, one hand pressed to the burning pain in his shoulder, dizzy from shock.

"Reisa?" he called. There was no answer. "Reisa?" He staggered to his feet. A bloodstained arm stretched from among the rocks behind him.

"Reisa!" Desperately, Apollo dug at the rubble, ignoring the pain in his shoulder, ignoring the dust and stones still settling from above. He could find no sign of life, and as he pushed more debris away, his hand came away bloody. No breath, no pulse met his questing fingers. Tears of grief and rage blinded him. He worked in a daze, flinging rocks wildly across the ledge as he fought to free Reisa's body.

At last, he held her in his arms. Her face was unmarked, aside from a few cuts and bruises, but she sagged lifelessly, her body limp, her neck broken.

A movement behind him sent Apollo spinning around in a mindless attack, and it was a full centon before he realised he was choking another Colonial Warrior. Releasing his grip, he sank down again beside Reisa.

Massaging his neck, Arion looked at the grieving man before him. The uniform was torn and dusty, stained with ash and blood, barely recognisable as that of a Warrior. Arion bent to help him, noticing that the second Warrior was a woman, noticing the GALACTICA insignia on her collar. He reached to check for life signs or injuries, but the first Warrior gathered the body into his arms as if somehow to shield her.

"No... No... It's too late, too late..." Tears streaked the ash and dust, falling on the woman's lifeless face. "Too late... Oh, Reisa!" Gently, he kissed her dusty forehead and smoothed her hair. "Reisa..."

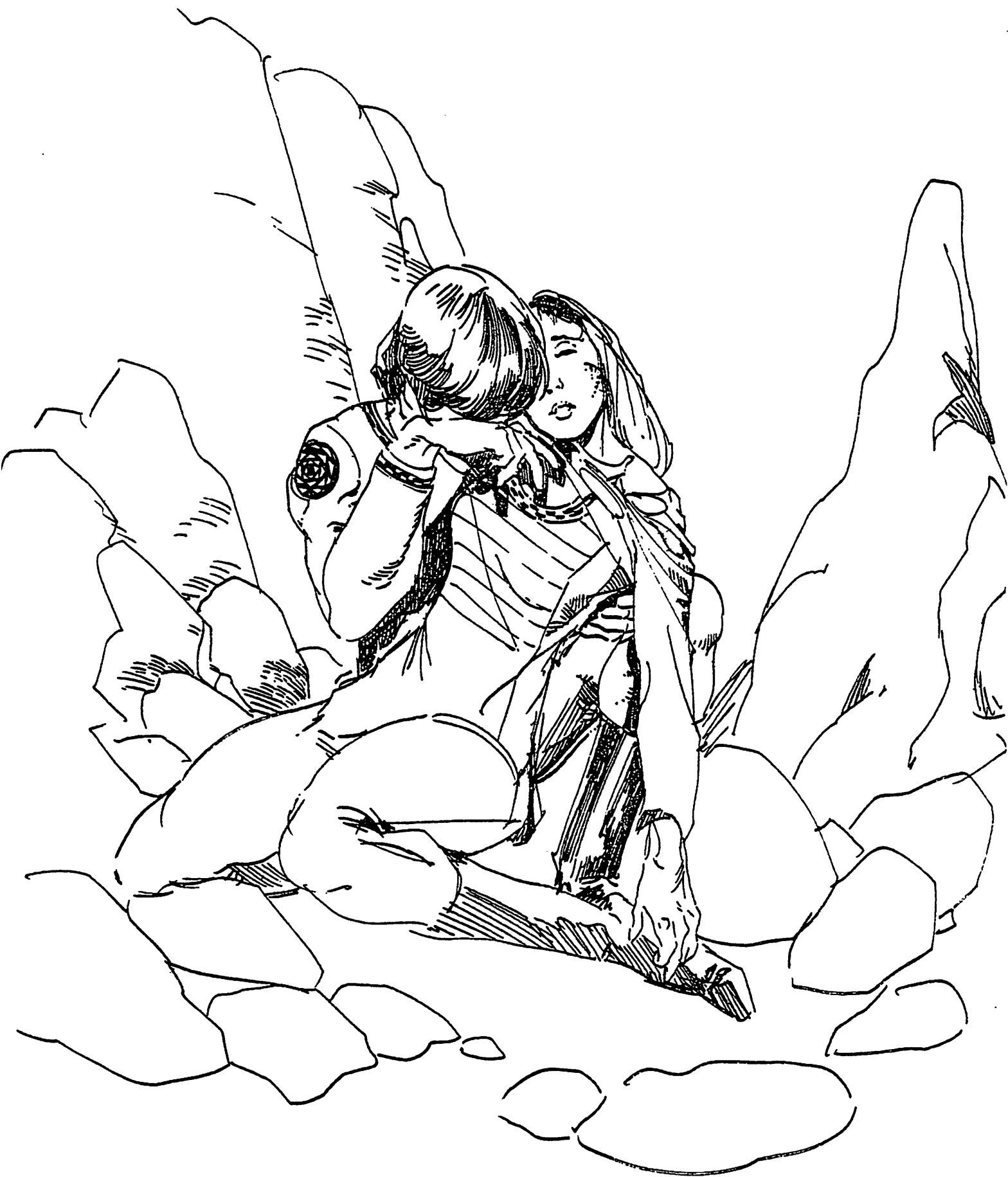
"Arion! Arion, you stupid little... Where in Hades are you?" Morgan's voice thundered from the wrist comlink.

"Answering a distress signal, sir," Arion replied, and added quickly before Morgan could continue, "I've located two Warriors, sir."

"Warriors? Whose? We aren't missing anyone."

"I don't know yet. One's dead; the other's in shock, I think. Their insignia's from another..." Arion tried to go on, but Morgan cut him off.

"You babbling idiot! Don't you realise you're at the mouth of an active volcano? Get out of there -- now, before it blows and takes you with it!"



"Yes, sir!" Arion wouldn't argue with that order. An active volcano? Frak!

Arion turned back toward the rock pile, where Apollo was still sitting and holding Reisa's body, his face buried in her hair.

"Sir?" He shook Apollo's shoulder. "Sir?"

"Captain Apollo," he answered woodenly.

"Captain Apollo, sir." Time to think about the oddly familiar name later, when they were out of danger. "We have to leave, now."

Tear-filled eyes looked away from him.

"Sir, we have to leave!" Arion's urgency was reinforced by a violent tremor.

Apollo struggled to his feet with Reisa's body in his arms, and turned to Arion.

"Captain." He placed a gentle hand on Apollo's shoulder. "We can't take her. The climb... We'd lose too much time, lose both our lives. She wouldn't want that, would she?"

"Arion, move!" Morgan ordered over the com.

"No..." Apollo's voice seemed to catch. "No... But why? Why?" His voice seemed to echo into the sky, as if demanding an answer from the gods. "Why?"

He lowered his head, tears stinging his eyes again. Staggering past Arion, he placed Reisa's body beside the cliff wall, then began gathering rocks. Arion muttered at the delay, but helped him build a cairn.

The task finished, Apollo stood for a moment, his hand resting on the cairn. Then he turned and blindly followed Arion. By the time they reached the shuttle, Arion was half-carrying him, and Apollo didn't even seem to see the scientists clustering around him or hear their anxious questions.

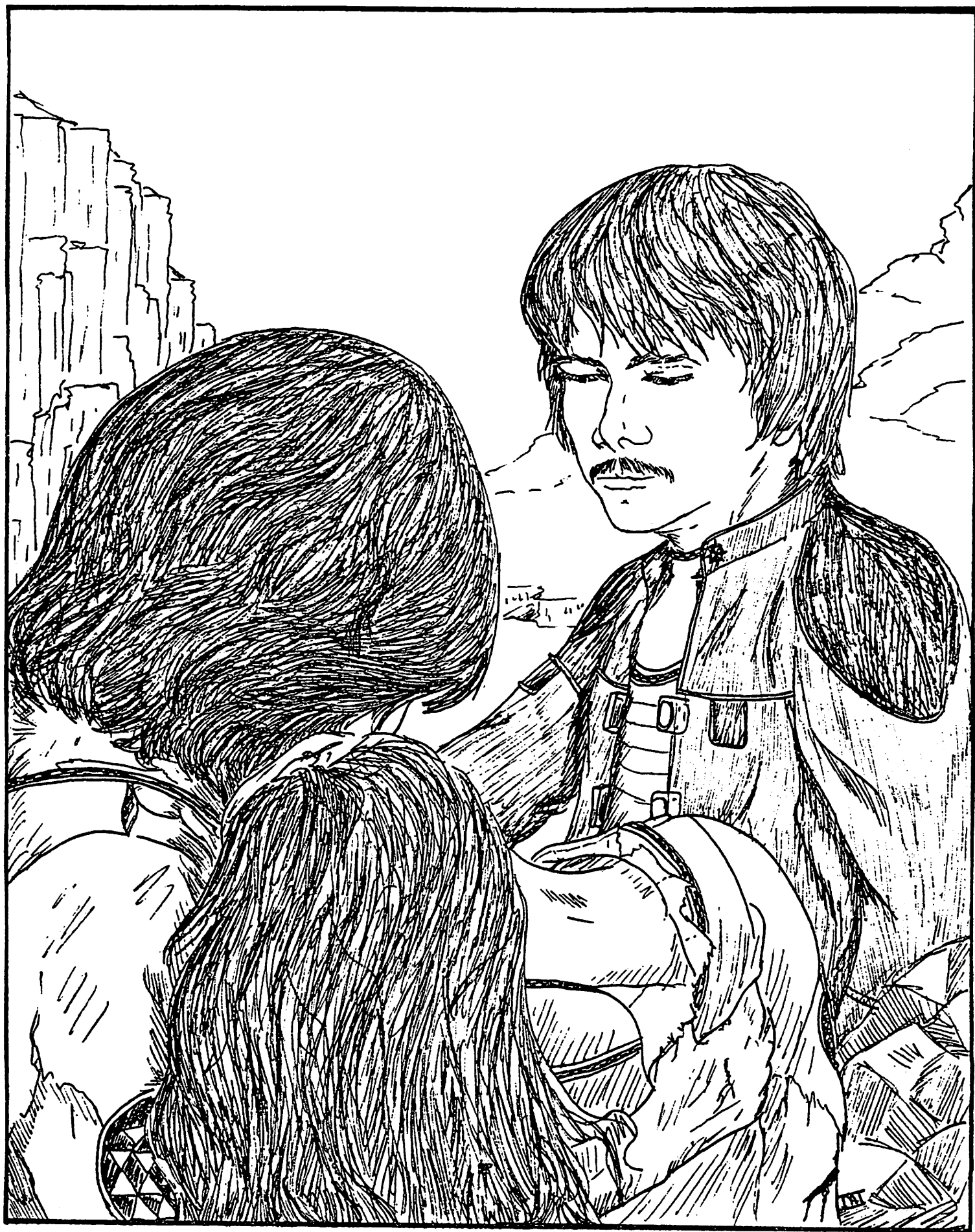
Arion gently lowered Apollo into a seat and, mindful of the violent quakes shaking the mountain, hurriedly bandaged the injured man's shoulder. Before he finished, Apollo was unconscious. Strapping him in and ordering his passengers back to their seats, Arion raced to the controls and sent the shuttle streaking for the safety of open space.

\* \* \* \* \*

Starbuck wearily followed the lizard upward, ignoring the shaking and rumbling of the mountain. He paused when a turn in the trail revealed the broken body of the priest. The beast ignored it, but Starbuck hesitated long enough to notice the wet, bloodstained knife.

"Someone fought," he noted, scrambling after the lizard. The next ledge told its tale. The neat cairn of rocks, the blood. Starbuck froze, his heart pounding. One dead -- but which one? Which friend would he mourn? Trembling





hands unpile the rocks. Then he leaned against the cairn.

"Reisa..." He gently brushed the dust from her face. "Then Apollo's still alive. But Reisa... Damn you, Iblis! Damn you..." Starbuck struggled to control his rage. "Apollo... Got to find Apollo." He replaced the rocks. "You've gone beyond now. I've still got to find Apollo..."

First, find the living; then grieve for the dead. It was the way she'd have done it.

At his urging, the lizard reluctantly moved on, pressing closer and closer to Starbuck's legs as the mountain grew quiet. Suddenly, with a deafening roar, the volcano exploded. Huge chunks of rock soared skyward or simply disintegrated. Lava flowed only a bodylength away from him. Ash and pumice rained down; searing gas tore the breath from his lungs, dimmed his vision, weakened him until it was all he could do to cling to his precarious perch. A tongue of lava inched closer, and Starbuck frantically sought a way out -- but there was none. Wide streams of molten rock flowed on all sides of him.

Another violent explosion wracked the mountain. Starbuck willed himself to face death, rather than let it sneak up like a thief. But what threatened him wasn't lava. Fireballs streaked closer and closer, until one enveloped him in agony and darkness.

\* \* \* \* \*

Starbuck opened his eyes and peered at the white-lit room around him. "Oh, frak! This is getting to be a habit!"

"There was no need for your death, Starbuck. We regret one of your friends was beyond our help."

"What about Apollo?"

"He is alive. His time is not yet done. He was picked up by another ship belonging to your people. They were gone before the eruption that so nearly claimed you."

"Another ship? The PEGASUS?"

"No, one called OSIRIS."

"OSIRIS? But..."

"Come. We cannot explain now. We have delayed here too long, and it is time for you to leave."

\* \* \* \* \*

Starbuck brought his ship in for a hasty landing, confident of his own ability to survive it. He had more important things to think about. There was a search party to organise, for one thing. Somewhere in space near that dying world, there was a battlestar, and on that battlestar was Apollo. There was

nothing they could do for Reisa now, but another battlestar would do great things for the Fleet's defence and morale.

He vaulted out of the cockpit almost before his Viper stopped, briskly passing the stunned fire control team that stared at him. Of course, he thought, they must've wondered if I was all right, as fast as I came in. Wait 'til they hear...

Ah, there was Boomer, with Jolly and his wingmate Melantha behind him. Nothing unusual in that. Other members of Blue Squadron clustered together near the turbolift. What was Commander Adama doing in the landing bay? Uh-oh. He was probably in for a reprimand. No matter.

He strode up to Adama, already trying to figure where the other battlestar, the OSIRIS, might be. He didn't notice the hint of tears in Boomer's eyes, the thick silence, the Commander's stooped shoulders.

Adama's mouth nearly dropped to the deck at Starbuck's strong, brisk voice. "Commander, request permission to join the search party as soon as my Viper is refueled."

There was a moment of silence. Starbuck suddenly realised the eyes of everyone present were on him. What was wrong here?

"What search party?" Adama asked in a quiet voice.

Starbuck stared. "Why, for Apollo and the ship, of course. He's waiting for us, bound to be. Sir, are you all right?"

Adama shook his head. Boomer moved unobtrusively to one side of Starbuck, Jolly to the other. "Apollo and Reisa won't need a search party. We're still trying to figure out how you escaped the planet's destruction."

Starbuck didn't understand. A wave of dizziness passed through him. Something suddenly didn't make any sense. "I know we can't help Reisa. Is Apollo here already? That doesn't make sense. They don't know where to look for us, and..."

"There's no way he could have survived, Starbuck. Apollo is dead."

Another wave of dizziness, pushed aside. The energy and purpose that had carried Starbuck back to the GALACTICA seemed to be fading. He felt weak. Apollo dead? That was impossible. He knew his friend was alive. They'd told him. He knew it...

The blond Warrior collapsed into the outstretched arms of Boomer and Jolly, and the doctor was at his side in a micron. Adama stared silently at the senseless form.

Boomer stood up, incredulous. "He doesn't know. He thinks Apollo's alive. He must've gotten off the planet before it blew up -- no one could've survived that explosion."

Jolly looked up, also confused. "But according to the Viper's log, Starbuck's last recorded position was on the volcano! How could he have escaped? It's not humanly possible!"

The doctor's voice was professional. "Escape he did, and survive he did. Some burns, a lot of bruises, probably smoke and ash in his lungs. Perhaps emotional trauma. His mind may be rejecting the idea of Apollo's death. That may have been necessary for his own survival. His scanner reports showed how bad it was down there. Maybe he'll be fine after a few days' rest. We can treat his body, but we'll have to wait and see about his mind, Commander."

"I see," Adama said. "Let me know, when he wakes, what he knows -- or thinks he knows." The Commander turned and began a slow walk to the lift. Blue Squadron melted away before him.

"Commander?" It was Melantha. Behind her, Boomer and Jolly were lifting Starbuck onto a stretcher.

Adama looked at her concerned face. "I've got to tell Boxey, before it comes to him through gossip. Prepare a shuttle, Lieutenant; be my pilot."

She nodded and ran to obey. Adama walked on.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was play period aboard the school ship. Athena had to laugh as she watched the miniature Commander Troy order his younger lieutenants to the attack. Dillon, Hera, and Ramses led their little squadrons on a devastating raid against the Cylon base-star bedframe. It never had a chance. They roared back in victory. Troy looked offended by her laughter.

"What's so funny? My squadron did great!" He sounded pompous, trying to sound authoritative.

"Oh, quite!" She smothered the laughter. "If your Warriors do as well at thirty-six yahrens as they do at six and ten, the Fleet will be quite safe from renegade beds!"

"Attack!" ordered the outraged Commander Troy.

Athena went down under the combined firepower and weight of three squadrons of small children.

That was the scene Commander Adama walked in on. The youngest children quickly swarmed away, carrying their attack to the next room.

"Hello, Father. Surprise inspection of our future Warriors?" Athena asked.

He couldn't smile back, looking down at the small group still on the floor before him, pain in his eyes.

"Is Starbuck back? I want to tell him what I learned today!" Young Dillon, frequently called Aquarius, was an orphan. Starbuck found the boy with his

dead mother on some obscure world, and brought him back to the Fleet. He'd never formally adopted the boy, insisting he wasn't "right" to be a father, but their ties were very close. The child was doted over by "Grandfather" Chameleon -- and Starbuck's more ambitious female friends wooed Dillon as well.

"Yes, but he's...busy. You'll have to wait to see him," replied the Commander. If Chameleon was one grandfather, Adama was the other.

Dillon looked crestfallen; then, in the fashion of small boys, he decided to return to his game. Hera hugged the Commander's leg and then roared after him, leaving only Troy and Athena.

Both of them stood. Athena waited tensely, knowing something was wrong, afraid it was serious, afraid it was family. "What is it?"

Adama stretched out his arms to his daughter and his grandson. His voice was husky. "I'm afraid Apollo won't be coming back. He was still on the planet when it exploded. Boxey, your father is dead. There's no chance..."

The very young man stared back at him, terrible comprehension dawning. It struck Adama that the child was taking his first steps toward manhood. Boxey was learning about life and death in time of war. It was a hard lesson for an adult, an even harder one for a child.

But this child was growing up surrounded by death. He'd seen his mother die, shot down by the enemy that had destroyed his home. He'd made friends among the pilots, only to see them launch for patrols and never return. And now he'd lost the only father he'd ever known.

The young eyes misted, the mouth quivered; then a boy blinked hard. "I understand, Grandfather. There are things I should do, shouldn't I?" He turned, heading aimlessly toward the door.

"Boxey?" Adama called, his voice low. The boy turned again and ran back to the white-haired older man, burying tears against a blue uniform.

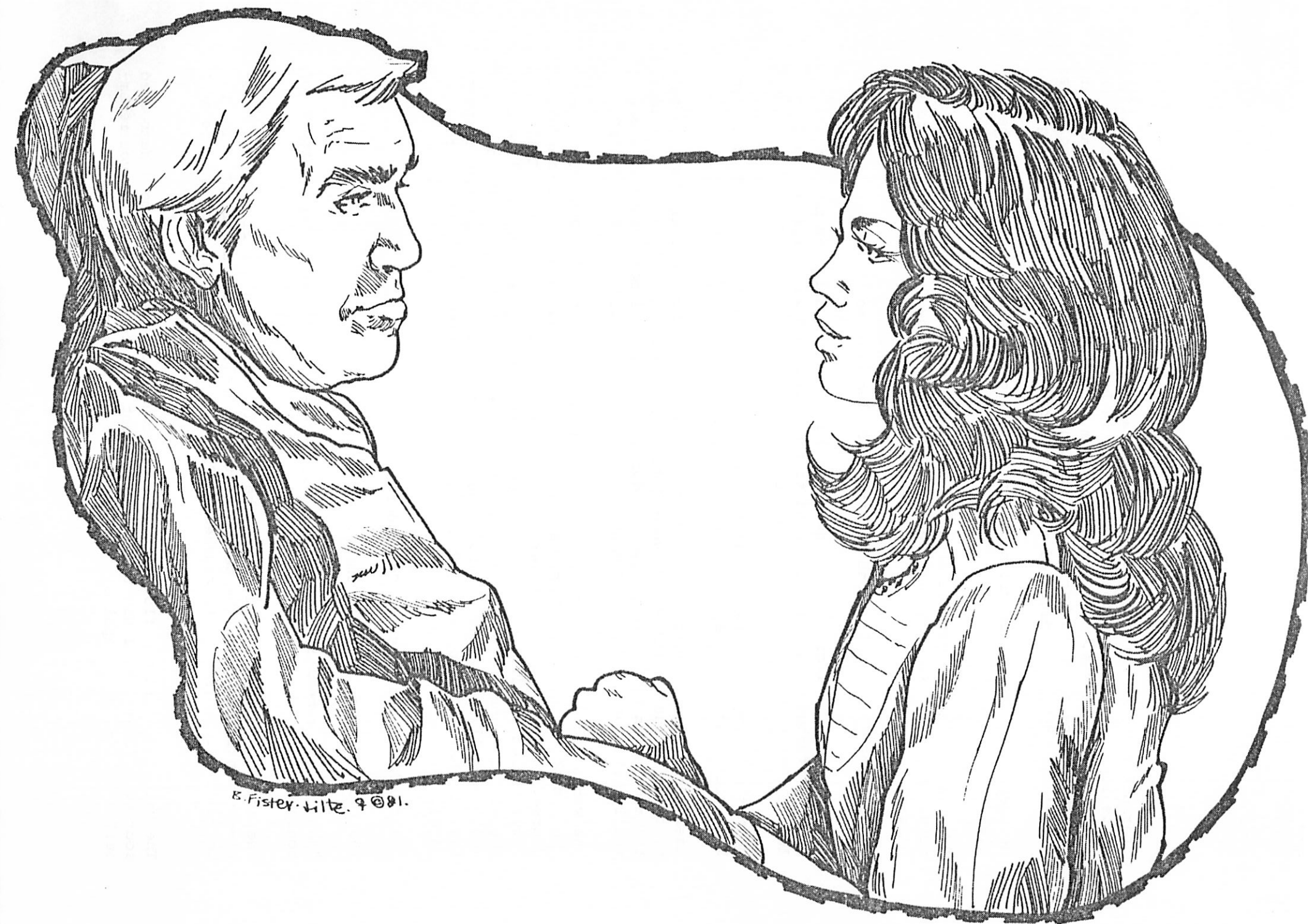
"Athena?" Adama turned his eyes to the bloodless face of his daughter, his only surviving child. The only colour on her face was the dark smudges on her cheeks, where eye make-up ran with her tears.

"And Starbuck?" she whispered. Her voice begged for some positive note in her emotional agony, some reason to live through the first horrible days to come. She'd been struck with so many pains, so many losses, since the Destruction. Like all of Adama's children, every tragedy struck close to her, and every new pain could tear open all the old wounds.

"He flew back. He's in Life Centre, but he seems all right," the Commander lied.

Athena moved into his other arm, weeping openly. Someone closed the door, leaving them to whatever consolation they could derive from mourning, and from each other's presence.





\* \* \* \* \*

Starbuck returned to consciousness with a sense of puzzlement. He couldn't quite recall what had happened to put him in Life Centre, though that was obviously where he was. He remembered from somewhere that Reisa was dead, and he ought to be mourning her, but he couldn't feel what he should. Apollo was alive! Somehow, that mattered most now. Profound relief flooded through him.

He opened his eyes, then grinned, not realising how sick he looked to the people clustered around him.

"What's everyone so worried about? Can't you see I'm fine?" he asked. His voice was low, somewhat hoarse, but he didn't know how he sounded to the others.

"'Bout time!" A small blond boy tried to clamber onto the bed.

"Hey, Aquarius, I might have known you'd be crawling all over me soon's I got back." Starbuck reached out a hand to the child, and was surprised to find he lacked the strength to pull the boy up.

Boomer's strong arms lifted Dillon, held the squirming child. "Kid, don't you know you're not supposed to bother a sick man?"

Cassiopeia's smile quickly turned professional. "I know we'd all love to talk to the Lieutenant, but we all have jobs to do, and he should rest. Besides, the medication will likely have him dozing for several more centars before he really wakes up. Shoo! Commander, do you want to try and talk to him?"

The woman faded in and out of vision. Starbuck thought he'd identified everyone around him by now. There was his father, Chameleon, and the Commander, of course. Boomer and Jolly were on one side, while the two boys, Dillon and Troy, tried to elbow their way closer to the bed. There were Cassiopeia and the doctor, and there was Athena, a strangely haunted-looking Athena. She must've really been worried about the two of them... The group began dispersing, Dillon insisting he ought to stay, Chameleon promising a treat if he behaved.

"Starbuck." That was the Commander.

The young Warrior tried to smile.

"What do you remember, Starbuck? Try to think, but don't let yourself get confused."

The question made no sense. Or maybe it did. He couldn't tell. "Well, I remember wanting to be in the search party for Apollo. He's all right. Too bad we can't help Reisa." He coughed. "I guess I'm not in as good a shape as I feel."

The voice was grave, floating into his consciousness from some disembodied source. "Starbuck, I don't know how you got back to us. What do you remember? Tell me about Apollo. Tell me what you were saying before."

"Apollo? He's all right, he survived. They saved him, and he'll be okay. I know that. Why do you ask? I told you that before."

"Starbuck, he's not all right."

"Why not?" Worry tugged at his mind. Something the doctor injected into his blood wouldn't let it stay too long, though.

"Apollo's dead. We have no evidence he ever got off the planet."

Stunned disbelief. Was this a joke? Not likely -- the Commander wouldn't do that to a sick man. But didn't they know? Hadn't he, Starbuck, told them?

"But he's alive! I know it! They told me he was all right..."

"Who are 'they'?"

Starbuck blinked. Why all the medications? They were affecting his memory. "Apollo's alive." That was all he remembered for sure. But that was what mattered. He drifted away to a land of precious memories.

Commander Adama and Dr. Salik stared down at him as Cassiopeia hovered in the background. They exchanged disturbed glances.

"Who's going to tell him?" Cassiopeia asked softly.

"More importantly, will he believe it?" muttered Dr. Salik.

Starbuck's breathing was soft and steady in the silent room.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was Boomer who told him. Chameleon had taken a break from his vigil for a nap, the first sleep he'd had since Starbuck returned, and Boomer was the only one at Starbuck's side.

"You're looking better, old buddy," Boomer said, smiling.

Starbuck smiled back and tried to rise. "How long have I been here?"

"Nearly four days. Think you've been off the job long enough?"

"A little rest never hurt, but I feel ready to take on a Cylon again. How's Apollo?"

"I guess it didn't register before. Starbuck, Apollo's gone. He never came back from that planet. There's just no way he could've survived. We've sung the final song for Apollo and Reisa."

Starbuck was stunned -- not that Apollo might be dead, but that Boomer thought he was. "But Apollo's alive! Boomer, didn't the Commander send a search team? He's alive! I know it!"



Boomer had to restrain Starbuck from jumping out of bed.

"We've been over your tapes again and again, Starbuck. We know what that place was like! And it exploded! There's no way Apollo could've made it. He's dead, Starbuck, he's dead! Listen to me, Starbuck!"

"No, you listen, Boomer! Apollo is alive! He's alive somewhere, and I know it. He may be waiting for us. We've got to look for him!"

"Starbuck, how did you get off that planet? How did you survive?"

Starbuck tried to think clearly. What Boomer said made very little sense, worrying about him when Apollo was still waiting...but where? How had he gotten back to the GALACTICA? He remembered piloting his Viper to a landing, and he remembered hot flowing rock and an explosion. But what about in between? What about Apollo? He was absolutely certain Apollo was alive, but he had no recollection of how he knew it. He remembered...Reisa...

Starbuck's head dropped back to the pillow. To Boomer, it appeared that an intense grief crossed his features, followed by sad weariness. Boomer hoped it was just acceptance of Apollo's death, and not a result of the weakness that kept Starbuck in Life Centre. He decided it might be best to let his friend rest. Rising quietly, he looked about for Cassiopeia. The woman had stayed near the med centre the past four days, and she was probably just in the next chamber. He slipped out.

Starbuck sighed as he threw back his blanket and looked around for something to wear. It was clear he was getting nowhere with Boomer, and he knew both Cassiopeia and Dr. Salik would just put him back to sleep. He had to talk to the Commander. Adama would listen to him.

In a few centons, Cassiopeia stepped into the chamber to check on Starbuck. He wasn't there. She sounded an alert.

\* \* \* \* \*

Commander Adama was in his quarters. He'd given up trying to sleep and was sitting at his desk, head in his hands. Lords, it was hard to say good-bye to the son who meant more to him than his own life. Apollo wouldn't even receive a proper funeral, only a "missing, presumed dead" to end his service record.

Boxey was taking it well, losing Reisa and Apollo both. The boy was strong and resilient. At least Starbuck was still there...

He'd not seen Athena in the past four days. The young woman had shut herself off from her friends, from her co-workers, and from her father. She was silent on the bridge, talking to no one as she performed her duties, eyes dark and haunted. Off duty, she retired to her quarters and kept the door locked.

There was a chime at the door. Adama looked up.

"Come in," he called, sighing, prepared for some minor problem that couldn't wait for his attention.

The door slid open, framing Athena. The Commander stared. She was in a pilot's uniform -- brown, not the dark blue the bridge crew wore. Her face was a set mask, without emotions, nearly colourless.

"Athena!"

"Father."

"I'm glad you stopped by, Athena, but why the uniform?"

"I've applied to join Blue Squadron. I'm a Warrior. Fighting is what I was trained to do. I'm going to do it."

"What?"

"I've been hiding behind our fighters, out of the battles, waiting on the bridge. Now, I'm going to do my share, Father. It's my duty, too. I'm joining the squadrons."

"Athena... No! You're needed on the bridge, too. Why are you doing this?"

"Apollo, Zac, Serina, Reisa -- they gave their lives for this Fleet, these people." Why did her lips curl around the words "these people" as if the words themselves were foul? "Should I be willing to do any less?"

"But..."

"You've sheltered me, Father, but I can't hide any longer. I am going to do this. With Apollo and Reisa dead, and Starbuck hurt, maybe grounded for a long time, Blue Squadron is short a few pilots. I'm trained, I can step right in. I'm needed."

"You don't know what you're doing! I won't let you!"

"I've already been accepted and assigned."

"If you kill yourself, what will I have left?"

"Father, I'm not out to kill myself. I just have to do this. I'm taking Apollo's place. They need me, Father, there's a job to do. I'm going to do it."

"Please, Athena, think it over. You're my only child now."

"I have thought it over. I'm due on my first patrol -- my first patrol. I hadn't realised it was so long since I'd been in a Viper. But I passed all the review tests. I'll see you later, Father. Try to get some rest."

Athena had never left the doorway. Now, she turned abruptly and vanished. By the time Adama reached the corridor, she was gone.

His shoulders drooped even more. His grief had doubled. Rest? Something in Athena had snapped, and she was trying to cover it with ice. What could he do



to help his child? The woman-creature named Athena was becoming a stranger to him, and there didn't seem to be anything he could do to stop or reverse the process. For both their souls' sakes, what could he do?

Another chime sounded. He turned to the door, hopeful.

Young Troy entered.

"Boxey."

"Hello, Grandfather," the boy said in a subdued voice. "I just wanted to see you a little."

"You're always welcome here, you know that." Adama managed a smile.

"Grandfather, would you tell me a story, a little kid story, like you did when I was little?"

"Can't sleep either, son, can you?"

The boy shook his head. "Not very well."

Another chime.

"Come in."

Starbuck entered, glanced behind him, and closed the door. He was dressed in a med tech's uniform, approximately his size.

"What are you doing out of Life Centre, Lieutenant? I wanted to be informed when you were recovered. And that uniform doesn't fit you, anyway."

"Commander, I have to talk to you. Please, just a few centons. Boomer, Cassiopeia, they won't listen to me. I'm sorry about the uniform, the med tech won't be too happy when he wakes up, but it was all I could find. Will you listen, sir, please?"

Troy took an unobtrusive step toward the alarm button on the Commander's desk. Starbuck looked mentally unstable, and the Commander had to be protected.

"What do you have to say, Lieutenant?"

"Apollo. Why didn't you search for him? He's alive!"

"We know what happened on that planet. We have no evidence to suggest Apollo escaped. Unless you can supply something better than a feeling, we still have nothing to go on."

"I don't know how I know, Commander, but I do. Someone or something got me out of there and on course for the GALACTICA. That same someone or something told me Apollo survived. I can't explain it, but I know it. Deep inside my heart and mind and soul, I know it!" There was conviction in Starbuck's voice. His clear blue eyes met the Commander's troubled ones in a steady

gaze. Adama could see Starbuck truly believed what he said.

The strange thing was, staring into those eyes, Adama could almost believe it himself. Was there some chance his son was alive? Had he survived the planet's death? Oh, Lords, was Apollo dead now because he, Adama, hadn't taken any action? Doubt nibbled at him, increasing the grief and worry in his mind.

A discreet chime sounded at the door. Starbuck jumped. The Commander spoke. "Come in."

Sergeant Hermes of Blue Squadron entered, striding into the chamber with a business-like air.

"Sir, Lieutenant Starbuck escaped from Life Centre. We found an unconscious med tech, and we think Starbuck may be headed for the launch bays, but we aren't sure, and we thought you ought to be told." It suddenly struck him who the blond man in the white uniform was. Hermes pulled his laser pistol and trained it on Starbuck. "All right, don't move. Come along peacefully, or I may have to shoot."

Starbuck's eyes were still on Adama.

"Lieutenant, I suggest you return to Life Centre. You're still not completely recovered, and we'll need you back in your Viper as soon as possible."

"Apollo?"

"You know we can't go back for him, even if he did survive."

"I know," Starbuck finally whispered.

"I'll think about what you said, Starbuck. I suggest you not give the Sergeant any trouble on the way back."

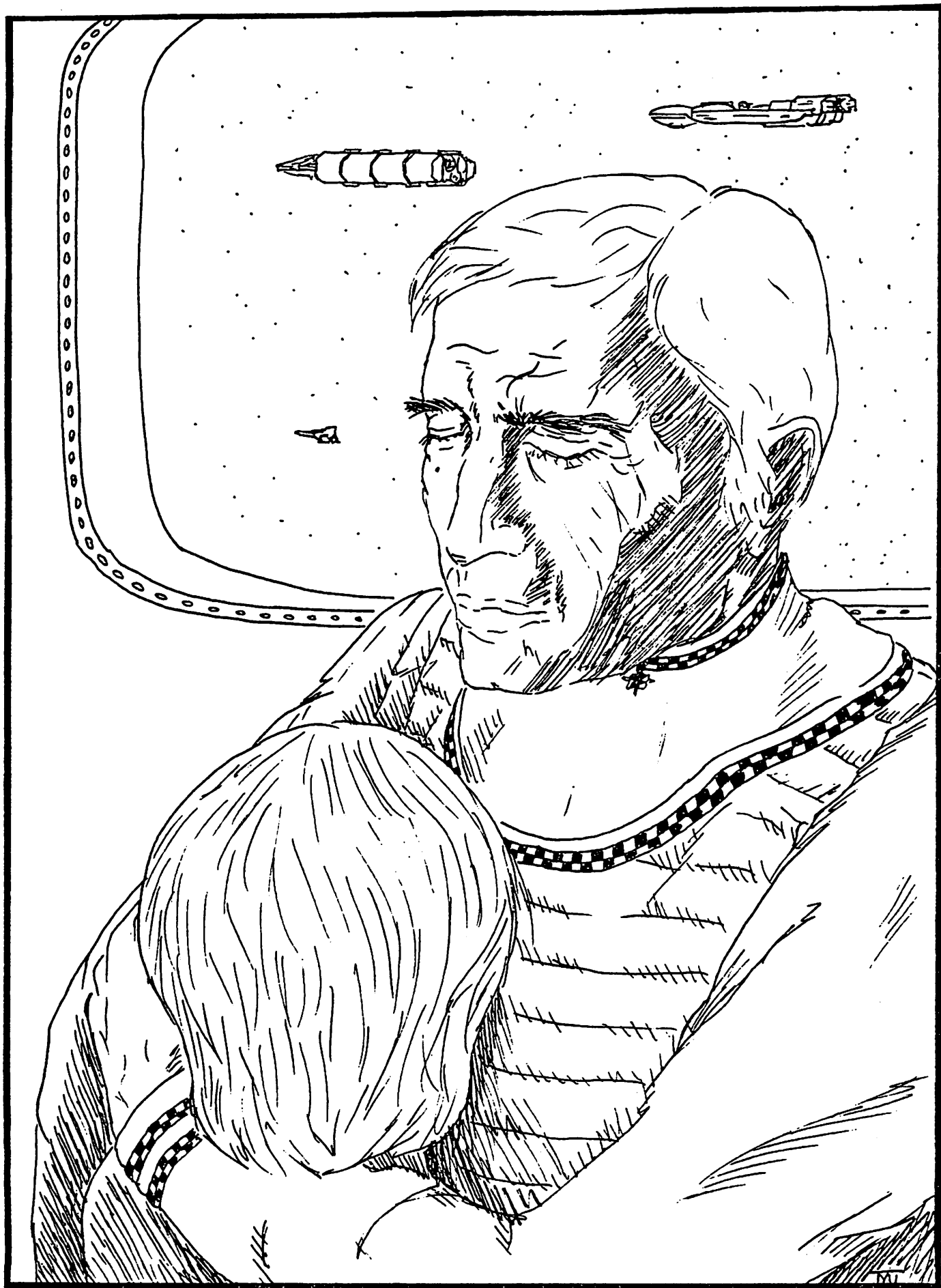
Starbuck managed a wan smile and turned toward Hermes, deciding the young Warrior would always look like a child -- even though he held his weapon as if he knew how to use it. With a last glance at Adama, Starbuck walked peaceably out of the Commander's quarters.

Troy and Adama were silent for several very long centons. Then Troy walked to the clear panel separating the Commander's quarters from space itself. He scanned the star field with his eyes as his grandfather moved to join him, dropping an arm over his shoulders.

"Well, Troy, how do you feel about Starbuck's declaration? Is he sane? Could he be right?"

"I believe him, Grandfather," the boy answered quietly. "Somehow, he's right. But there's a reason for it. Father must have something to do somewhere, so he's gone to do it, or been taken to do it. It may be clear across the universe, but my father is alive."

Adama stared out at the star field, listening.



"Grandfather, it may take him a centar, or it may take him yahrens, but he's got to do it. And, some day, Father will return, when he's done what he has to do. We'll wait, not here, because he'll come to Earth after us. Some day, when we're there, he'll come flying through the clouds and join us. I'll remember, and I'll be waiting for him."

Adama squeezed Troy's shoulder. "Faith is a good thing, if it's not misplaced."

"It's not misplaced. I believe Starbuck. And I think I can sleep now. Do you mind if I leave, Grandfather?"

"No, go and get some rest."

Troy left, and Adama was alone. He continued to stare out at the stars for a long time after his grandson left. When he finally spoke into the silence, there were tears in his eyes and his voice.

"Son, I don't know if what Starbuck says is true or not. I don't know if you're alive, if you have some mission somewhere else to fulfill. I want to believe it. There are many things I don't understand, but I know you're gone from here, from me, from your friends. Wherever you are, I wish you the best. I'm thinking of you, and I will remember."

The Commander sighed. There could be no going back. "Good-bye, Apollo. The Lords of Kobol be with you."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Probe shuttle to OSIRIS. Come in, OSIRIS. Do you read?"

Captain Diana and Commander Christopher leaned over the communications officer's shoulder as Sergeant Arion's voice crackled across the bridge.

"This is the OSIRIS, probe shuttle. Go ahead," ComTech Andromeda replied.

"Mission complete, all personnel safe."

"Excellent, Sergeant," the Commander responded. "Did the survey team get all their data?"

"Well, sir, I know Lieutenant Morgan did," Arion answered. He sounded nervous -- suspiciously so. "He says he's got enough information on red giants..."

"Arion, did the others get what they wanted?" It was Diana's voice.

"Well, uh, no, Captain, not quite. You see, we picked up a survivor, a stranded Warrior, and Morgan said we had to get off-planet right away, so..."

"What was that shuttle doing on the surface? You had orders not to land."

"Well, Commander, I..."

Commander Christopher shook his head in resignation as he met Diana's eyes. Some things never changed. Leave it to Arion...

"Commander?"

"Morgan, I thought you said that planet's too unstable to attempt a landing."

"It is, sir. Arion was responding to a distress code. There were two Warriors on the surface, one dead."

"The survivor? Who is he? Where's he from?"

"I don't know, Commander," Morgan replied. "I haven't had a chance to speak to him."

"Arion?"

"He's unconscious, sir," Arion answered. "One of the geosurvey techs says he thinks he's in shock, suffering from exposure and exhaustion. And he's been stabbed, sir."

"Stabbed? How in...?" The Commander glanced at Diana, who shrugged. "All right, Sergeant. We'll have a med crew waiting in the landing bay. Morgan, how soon do you estimate you'll reach us?"

"About ninety centons, Commander. I'll have a full report for you then."

"Fine. Report to Captain Diana when you land." He chuckled as he turned. "And, Diana, I expect that report from you in the morning."

"Of course, sir," Diana replied with a smile, then left the bridge. Morgan would know where to find her. And the mystery of the unidentified Warrior would just have to wait until the man could answer their questions.

Several centars later, Diana and Morgan were alone in her quarters. The formal report had taken less than a centar, and they were grateful for a little time alone. Diana was curled, bastlike, at Morgan's side, her head on his shoulder. They were sipping ambrosia...

The interruption was not particularly welcome.

"What in Hades are you doing here?" Diana demanded.

"Well, Captain, I..." Arion looked flustered.

"You what?" The redhead's eyes flashed angrily.

"Uh, I've got something for you. I, uh, found it...on that planet today."

"Arion, what in blazes are you talking about?"

"It's a surprise. I have to show you."

"Now, Arion? It's the middle of the..."

Arion nodded eagerly, and Diana glared at him, not sure whether to be angry or amused.

"Look, Arion, I'm very busy. Lieutenant Morgan and I are..."

"Now, Captain, please. It's really special, and it won't wait."

"I can't think of anything that 'won't wait,' Arion. Especially at this center. We can talk about it in the morning."

"No! Really! It's got to be now!"

"You may as well give in, Diana." Morgan put an arm around her shoulders. "Knowing Arion, he'll just keep babbling at you until you do."

"We could close the door and ignore him."

"Do you honestly think that'd do any good?" Morgan whispered in her ear.

Diana sighed. "I suppose not. And I certainly can't argue with both of you." She turned to Arion. "All right, Sergeant, where's your surprise?"

"Just come with me." Arion grinned broadly as he led Diana and Morgan on a roundabout path through the ship.

They went to the bridge, to the zoo, to half a dozen other places, and after a while even Morgan's considerable patience began to wear a bit thin. But when they entered Life Centre, the telepath -- who'd carefully refrained from probing Arion's mind for an explanation of his "surprise" -- suddenly knew what it was. There'd been no reason to speculate on the identity of the man they'd rescued; Arion never even indicated he knew the man's name. But now all the pieces of the mystery fell into place, and Morgan knew.

He lingered by the door, knowing he couldn't intrude. This was something Diana had to face alone. The telepath wished he could help, but his own principles wouldn't permit him to interfere. She was on her own.

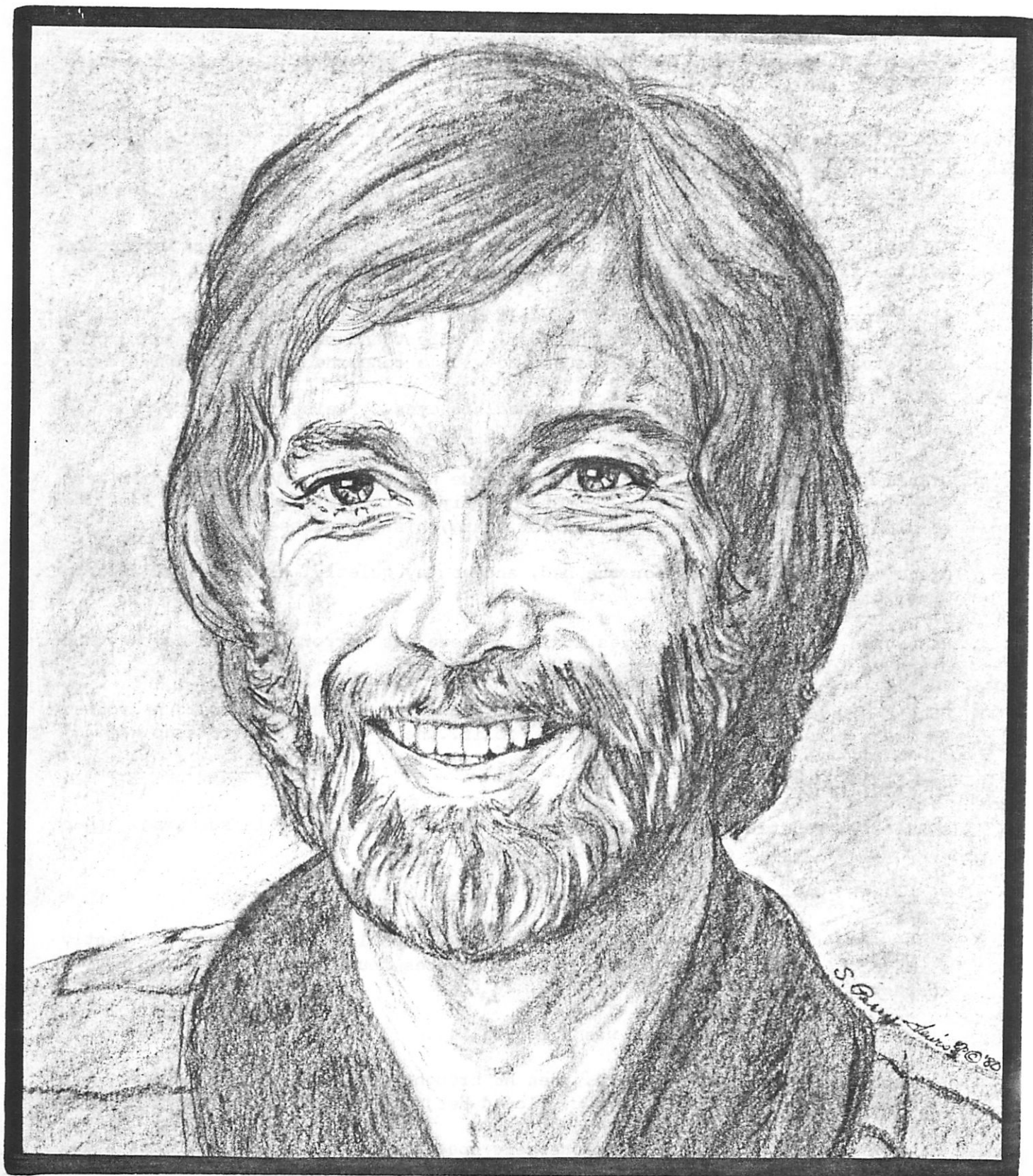
Diana didn't suspect a thing as she followed Arion across the large chamber toward where the unconscious Warrior lay. She was puzzled, nothing more -- and then, suddenly strangely uneasy, she stood beside the bed and looked at her companion.

"I think you know him," Arion said quietly.

Diana instantly saw past the bandages and bruises. She stood transfixed, staring at the face from her past, and for a micron, as all the colour seemed to drain from her face, Arion actually thought she'd faint.

"Apollo..." She barely whispered his name as she knelt beside him, hesitantly reaching out to touch him, as if to assure herself that he was real. When she finally looked up, there were tears in her eyes. "Arion, what happened to





him?"

"I don't know, Captain, but Dr. Senbi says he'll be okay. I asked just before I came to get you."

She nodded, then turned back to Apollo, taking his hand in both of hers. Arion started to move away. "Arion?"

He had to lean over her shoulder to hear her clearly. "Yes, Captain?"

"Arion, I want you to find the Commander. Tell him this man is Captain Apollo, flight commander of the GALACTICA. He's Commander Adama's son."

Arion hurried from Life Centre, himself more than a little shaken by Diana's reaction. Morgan remained by the door, a silent and understanding guard over her privacy. More than once, he had to wave a concerned med tech away.

It was nearly morning when Apollo opened his eyes. "Reisa?" Then, with a low cry of anguish, he tried to get up. "Reisa!"

Diana, sitting on the edge of the bed beside him, caught him and, as his memory of the past days returned, held him, trying to comfort him. At last, he relaxed in her arms, too exhausted for tears, his eyes closed once more.

Diana eased him back down on the bed, and he lay quietly, almost as if asleep. "Apollo?"

He sighed, then opened his eyes again. There was horror in their depths, and Diana couldn't begin to guess what he was seeing.

"She's dead," Apollo said, the horror in his eyes matched by his voice. "Reisa's gone, there's no one left. Iblis...he's won... There's no way..."

"Apollo!"

Diana's voice struck him like a physical blow. He blinked in surprise, then saw her -- really saw her -- for the first time.

"Diana?" He stared in bewilderment. "What...?"

She nodded. "You're safe aboard the OSIRIS, Apollo," she told him, gently stroking his hair. "One of our research probes found you. Arion said your companion was dead."

"Reisa," he sighed. "There was a rockfall... I tried to bury her, but..."

"Arion helped you build a cairn, then he brought you here." She regarded him thoughtfully for a micron. "You...loved her, didn't you?" she asked.

"I... Yes, I did. She was someone very special, and..." He closed his eyes, fighting the pain, the grief that threatened to overwhelm him. A tear slid down his cheek, and Diana wiped it away as he whispered brokenly, "Why? Why did she have to die?"

"I can't answer that, Apollo," she said softly, not sure what else to say. "I wish I could." She hesitated, reaching out to touch his cheek, then took a deep breath. "Do you want to tell me what happened?"

He shook his head, choking back a sob. "Not now," he answered, his voice barely audible.

"All right, Apollo, later, if you want. You should rest now."

Suddenly he caught her hand tightly, clinging to it with a fierce desperation. "Diana, I've lost everyone now, everyone I've ever cared for. Except you. I can't lose you, too."

From the doorway, Morgan watched in silence as Diana bent to kiss Apollo, her bright hair hiding both their faces. He hadn't heard what they'd said, hadn't wanted to, but he couldn't help feeling the intensity of their emotions. Their love, he judged, was as great now as it had ever been.

Morgan felt a sudden surge of fear -- fear for Diana. He knew Apollo only from what she'd told him, which made his knowledge extremely biased, and he couldn't begin to guess what the man had endured, especially in the past few days. But he judged, from the turmoil of emotions that seemed almost tangible to him, that Apollo had been through a traumatic experience, that he was a deeply troubled young man, badly hurt, badly scarred emotionally. Because of her love, Diana would suffer along with him. And that was one thing Morgan would not permit -- for Diana to be hurt by this man from her past.

\* \* \* \* \*

Apollo aimlessly wandered the corridors of the OSIRIS, unable to feel himself a part of the self-contained world around him. The battlestar was familiar, of course -- almost hauntingly so -- but it was somehow alien as well, and Apollo knew the real reason for that strange "otherness" didn't lie with the ship. He kept seeing mental images of the GALACTICA superimposed over the reality of the OSIRIS, until he wasn't entirely sure which was which. He felt lost, alone...

He'd been kept in Life Centre for three days, until the medical staff was convinced he'd recovered from the worst effects of his ordeal on Iblis' planet. His left shoulder was still heavily bandaged, and he was still weak; the doctors told him he'd not recover his full strength for several days yet. They also warned him not to push himself too hard.

Apollo smiled humourlessly as he reflected on that warning. How could he push himself too hard if he wasn't allowed to do anything? He couldn't fly -- at least, not yet -- and he didn't have the necessary background to work with most of the science teams. He could have helped out on the bridge, or at one of the computer stations -- but even that wasn't permitted. He was, in fact, probably the only person aboard the OSIRIS who didn't have some sort of assignment, either military or civilian. All he could do was spend his time looking at scanner tapes or walking, alone, through the ship. His frustration and misery grew along with his boredom, and four days of forced inactivity had him nearing an emotional explosion.



Diana was the only bright point in the darkness of his despair. He loved her as he always had, needed her more now than ever in the past -- but, because he felt he had been the cause of the deaths of nearly everyone he loved, he feared for her as well. He didn't want her to die, too, not because of him. Torn by the growing conflict between love and fear, he struggled for some sort of emotional balance, not sure what to do any longer. What was best -- not for him, but for Diana? Perhaps if he tried not to care, not to love her, she'd be safe...

So Apollo roamed the OSIRIS like a pale, silent ghost, alone and -- by his own choice -- friendless. He rebuffed every overture made to him, and Diana, watching him slowly isolate himself from everyone around him, realised his behaviour was totally unlike that of the Apollo she knew. He was as gentle as ever, but even more quiet, more remote, becoming more and more withdrawn.

"He's like a stranger," she told Morgan sadly. "I don't know him any more. He needs someone so badly, so desperately... I can't leave him, can't risk hurting him further -- and I think he's afraid to be alone. But I can't seem to reach him."

"You still love him, don't you?"

Diana nodded silently.

"Then you have to understand what's happening to him. He's been uprooted, torn from everyone, everything he knows, and he's terribly afraid of himself, of hurting someone else..."

"Morgan, I do understand. But he's like a shadow of himself, as if the spirit that makes him what he is, who he is, is gone, buried somewhere so deeply... I've been watching him torture himself for days now. He can't take much more. He's tearing himself apart, destroying himself, and he won't let anyone help, won't talk about it, not to me, not to anyone. I don't think he knows what he's doing to himself." She blinked tears from her eyes. "He's hurt so badly, Morgan... I think... No, I'm afraid maybe he wants to die -- and I can't help him. He won't let me."

"Maybe he'll let me."

"You? But you don't even know him, you..."

"I think I'm capable of knowing him better than he'll probably ever know himself. Or have you forgotten?"

"Forg..." Her eyes widened in sudden understanding -- and surprise. "You mean...? Would you...? Morgan, it goes against everything..."

"...everything I've lived by all my life. I know. But I think it's necessary this time. Your Apollo and I, we're a lot alike. And right now, he desperately needs someone, needs to be jarred out of his depression, forced to see reality... Maybe I can help him where no one else can. I think it's the only chance he's got right now. I've got to try."

The telepath didn't actively try to find Apollo; it was better to let their meeting actually be the accident he felt it must appear to be. So it wasn't until late the next day, when Morgan was on his way to the converted celestial chamber that served as his lab, that he met the Captain from the GALACTICA. In fact, they literally collided in an otherwise deserted corridor.

"Sorry," Apollo muttered, a little shaken by the impact, one hand pressed to his injured shoulder.

"No, it's my fault. Everyone's always telling me I should look where I'm going. You're Captain Apollo, aren't you? From the GALACTICA?"

Apollo nodded silently, suddenly uneasy.

He had reason to be. Even as he apologised, Morgan probed the other man's mind, seeking a way to help him. The probe took only microns...

"I'm Lieutenant Morgan, Purple Squadron and astrosurvey." He cocked his head quizzically. "Say, didn't Captain Diana tell me you've some interest in celestial observation?"

Again, Apollo nodded, still silent.

"Look, I was on my way to my lab. It's an old celestial dome, once used for navigation. There's a lot to see from there, an incredible view. Care to come along?" Even as he asked, Morgan took Apollo's arm firmly.

"I'd rather not." Apollo's voice was cold as he tried to draw away, not sure why he felt so strangely...afraid?...of this man.

"It might be a good idea, you know -- help you get acquainted with the OSIRIS and..."

"I prefer to be alone."

"Oh? Something better to do, Captain?" The voice was almost -- but not quite -- insolent.

Morgan's pull on his arm was nearly irresistible. Apollo tried to free himself, but simply didn't have the strength. His uneasiness increased.

"Lieutenant..." The icy tone conveyed a warning Morgan blithely ignored. "If you do not release my arm at once, I am going to have you placed on report."

Morgan stopped abruptly, forcing the other man to turn and face him. "Captain, this is the OSIRIS, not the GALACTICA. You're not the Commander's son, not here. And there are one or two other things you'd better realise."

Apollo's eyes glittered angrily. "I don't think there's anything you have to say that..."

"Shut up, and stop acting like an utter idiot!" Morgan snapped. "You're going to listen to me, whether you want to or not. It can be in my lab, or here, or



even on the bridge, for all I care. Your choice, Captain."

"Then say what you want, here and now, and get it over with."

Morgan forced Apollo back against a wall, and when he spoke again, his voice was low, seething with what seemed to be barely suppressed fury. His words, deliberately intended to hurt, struck with almost physical force. "Serina is dead, Apollo. So is Zac. So is Sheba..."

Apollo's eyes widened in shock at the names. How did he know...?

"You didn't kill them, you know, even if you want to believe you did, and there was no way you could save them, either. You've wallowed in self-pity quite long enough, and I'm beginning to get just a little sick of it."

The shock began to give way to anger. What right did this man have...?

Morgan went on, unperturbed by Apollo's reactions, deliberately goading him, forcing what had to come. It was no cure, only a temporary solution at best, but it was better than nothing.

"Frankly, I don't give a damn what you do to yourself. You could walk out an airlock, or try to ram a base star, or anything else you damn well please; it wouldn't matter to me. But the OSIRIS needs the talents you have to offer. And there's one very lovely woman aboard this ship who, for some strange and probably incredibly stupid reason, just happens to care more about you than about herself, or the OSIRIS, or even the fate of the entire human race. Just because you grew up with her doesn't give you the right..."

He didn't get any farther. Apollo literally threw himself at Morgan, knocking him to the deck, trying in blind rage to silence -- if necessary, even to kill -- this man who knew things he couldn't possibly know, who said things...

The fight lasted longer than Morgan thought possible. Anger, despair, and frustration combined to give Apollo strength he shouldn't have. His hands closed on Morgan's throat, fingers locking tightly. The surprised telepath, not expecting so much strength from the injured Apollo, was dangerously near to blacking out before he could marshal his not-inconsiderable psychokinetic powers.

Twisting violently, Morgan rolled from beneath his opponent, breaking Apollo's hold and straddling him, pinning him to the deck. He held him there with the full force of both body and mind.

For a moment, as Apollo went completely limp, Morgan thought he might have gone too far. Then Apollo took a deep, shuddering breath and opened his eyes again. He stared silently at the telepath, his expression one of stunned surprise.

"Well, Captain?" Morgan asked quietly. His voice was hoarse, and he was still a little breathless.

"How...? How...in Hades...?"

The telepath grinned silently.

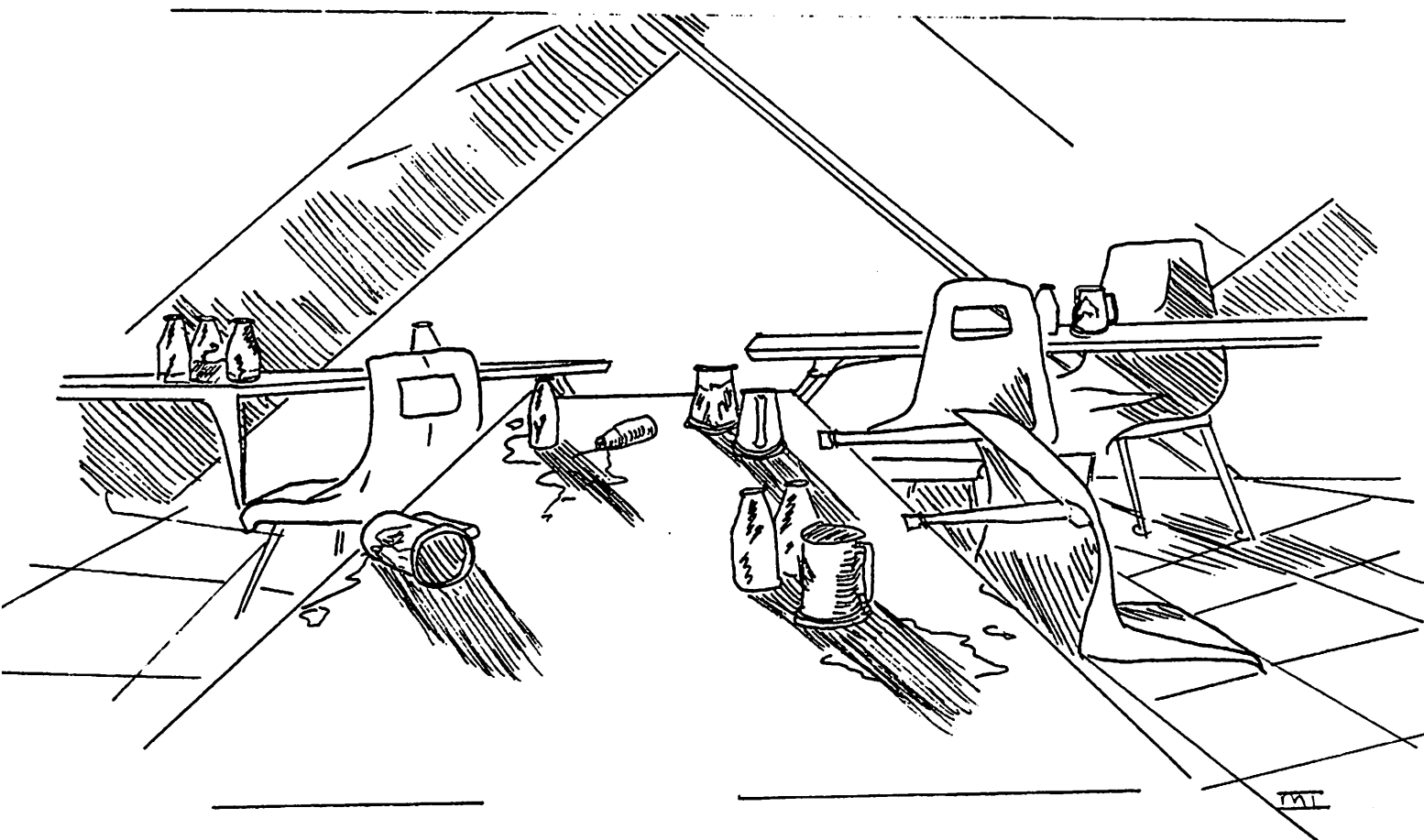
"I don't know...what you are...or who you are," Apollo panted. "And I don't think...I like you...very much. You've forced me to see..." He closed his eyes briefly, catching his breath, then looked up at Morgan again, shaking his head in wonder. "I think I should probably hate you, but..." He smiled shyly, a tentative, embarrassed smile.

"But," Morgan finished, grinning back at him, "what you'd really like to do right now, instead of trying to kill me, is get up off this deck, have a drink or two -- with me, since there's no one else around -- and then find a certain red-haired captain." The telepath got to his feet, then helped Apollo up. "I think the two of you have a lot to talk about."

"Oh?" Apollo was genuinely surprised. "What makes you think so?"

"Easy, Apollo," Morgan replied with a chuckle. "I read your mind."

Laughing, the two men -- both somewhat rumpled, bruised, and battered -- headed arm-in-arm for the Officers' Club. Centars later, Diana found them there. And, centars after that, she had to put them both to bed.





# **RESCUE MISSION**

## RESCUE MISSION

(By Joy Harrison and David Morgan)

Diana lay very still, staring into the darkness. Beside her, Apollo stirred restlessly; she didn't want to wake him, knowing how badly he needed whatever sleep he could get. When he cried out wordlessly, though, she turned, taking him in her arms, holding him, caressing him, until he finally settled back into a deeper sleep once more.

Dreams -- nightmares, really -- had haunted Apollo ever since he'd been brought aboard the OSIRIS. He seemed to find some measure of peace with Diana, but it never lasted more than a few centars before something happened to remind him of what he'd lost, of Boxey and his father, Serina and Zac. Guilt mixed with the grief and horror, tormenting him almost beyond endurance.

Diana sighed. Morgan had forced Apollo to take as nearly objective a look as possible at his own behaviour, and the result was a man determined to hide his pain, whatever the cost to himself. Perhaps it was a mistake -- but it had allowed him to come to her at last, to apologise for trying to avoid her, for inadvertently hurting her, and to admit his reasons for doing so...

"...I was afraid of hurting you, afraid of something happening to you, like it did to Reisa. If Iblis could destroy her, he..." The carefully expressionless mask crumpled as grief and horror threatened to overwhelm him. "Oh, Diana, Diana, I couldn't bear it if..."

Diana slid her arms around his waist, and he clung to her fiercely for a moment, his face buried in her hair.

"I love you, Apollo," she murmured softly.

He kissed her then, for the first time since his arrival, the first time in yahrens. It was as if those yahrens had never been, and she was breathless when he released her.

Neither of them spoke, but in the stillness their eyes said a great deal. At last, Apollo took Diana's hand and led her toward the bed, moving slowly, as if in a dream. She went willingly, her eyes never leaving his. Then he kissed her again, this time with a passion that surprised them both.

Diana made no protest as Apollo began to remove her uniform. Then, naked to the waist, she giggled suddenly and dropped down on the bed to remove her boots. Apollo began to laugh as he did the same. The strange mood of solem-

nity broken, he pulled Diana back into his arms, this time holding her as a woman, not as a fragile toy. His hands left trails of fire on her skin.

Her fingers traced the line of a scar where a dagger thrown by a friend had caught him once, and Apollo shivered as she went on to find other scars, new since she'd seen him last. Her hand rested lightly for a moment on the bandage still covering the nearly-healed knife wound on his left shoulder; in that micron, they both thought of how close that knife had come to taking his life.

Diana had been Apollo's first real love, as he had been hers, and they spent a long time rediscovering one another. Apollo marvelled at how his hands seemed to know each curve of her body, as if he'd last held her the night before, instead of yahrens ago.

There was no hurry, no urgency that night, only an infinite tenderness, as Apollo and Diana learned the bond between them had never been broken.

Centars later, Apollo lay awake, acutely aware of the warmth of Diana's body along his right side, her head on his shoulder. He smoothed her hair from her face, and she snuggled closer to him, one arm flung across his chest.

Tears burned his eyes, as Apollo remembered other times, other nights -- and other loves, now dead. Suddenly afraid for her, he drew Diana into his arms, holding her tightly. She murmured a sleepy protest but didn't wake, and after a few centons, Apollo, too, fell asleep.

That had been days ago. And in the nights that followed, Apollo and Diana reaffirmed the enduring strength of their love, sometimes as tenderly as that first night, sometimes with a passion almost frightening in its intensity.

But Apollo was torn by a conflict of emotions that worsened with the passage of time, as his love for Diana warred with his grief for those who'd died, with his feelings of guilt and his fears for Diana's safety. And Diana's delight in having Apollo back again, alive and well -- at least physically -- began to be overshadowed by a growing concern for his sanity.

Night after night, Apollo's tortured dreams awakened them both, until he feared to sleep -- and until Diana seriously considered getting him drunk or drugging him, anything to allow him to rest. His emotional distress affected him physically, and he desperately needed help, but wouldn't -- or maybe couldn't -- accept it from the OSIRIS medical staff.

Dr. Elara, the senior psych officer, was nearly ready to give Apollo up as hopeless. "He will not allow us to help him in any way," she reported. "He is extremely dangerous to himself, although at present he represents no danger to others. He cannot recognise that his behaviour is becoming increasingly suicidal, and as long as he cannot admit this, we can do nothing for him. He is a classic manic-depressive..."

Commander Christopher was alone in his quarters when he read the report. He stared silently at the print-out for a long time, remembering a much younger Apollo, yahrens ago on Caprica. It hurt to see the man destroying himself -- and it hurt worse to see what that self-destruction was doing to Captain

Diana, one of his most valuable officers.

Christopher studied the medical report carefully once more, then summoned Diana to his quarters.

"You sent for me, sir?"

"Come and sit down, Diana. This conversation is very much off the record." He handed her a glass of ambrosia. "Here, you look as if you need this."

She smiled ruefully. "Is it that obvious?"

He nodded. "You look exhausted. Haven't you been sleeping well?"

"Not really." She didn't elaborate.

"Want to tell me about him?"

Diana started, then quickly recovered her outward composure. "There isn't much I can tell you," she replied, not needing to ask whom he meant. "I assume you've read the medical reports."

Christopher nodded again. "They present a rather gloomy picture. The prognosis is not very encouraging."

"What do you intend to do?" she asked, not looking at him.

"I don't know yet. Do you have any suggestions?"

She shook her head silently. Apollo wants to die, she thought, but he's not even aware of it -- in fact, the very idea would shock him. But it's true, all the same. That's why Dr. Senbi won't log him fit for duty yet, even though Apollo badly needs the familiar routine. And I can't try to persuade the Commander to countermand Senbi's orders, because I know he's right...

"Are you sure, Diana? You..."

"Commander, I can't suggest anything, I don't dare. Don't you understand? I'm too involved myself. I'm part of the problem." Her anguish surprised him.

"All right, Diana, I think I understand. And I do have one idea. It may not do any good at all, but I don't think it'll hurt to try. In a couple of days, we'll be passing through a star system with habitable planets. Our probes and surveys have found no highly advanced life forms, nothing inimical. I suggest you and Captain Apollo take a shuttle to one of those planets, spend some time alone, away from the pressures of the ship. Maybe it'll help."

Diana frowned. "I've wondered myself, Commander, if getting away from the OSIRIS could be at least part of the answer. It's so much like the GALACTICA that..." She shook off the thought. "How long will we have?"

"A few days, maybe a section. We'll send a recall signal to warn you to start

back." He paused briefly. "Diana, I say this in all sincerity. I met Captain Apollo once, a long time ago, and I liked the man. I wish you the best of luck."

"Thank you, sir." Only a slight tremor in her voice betrayed her emotions.

Apollo was in the Officers' Club, where Diana had left him after receiving the summons to the Commander's quarters. He sat alone at a table in a dark corner, staring morosely into the mug before him.

When Morgan entered the large room, he spotted Apollo almost immediately. The Captain's deepening depression was a scream of pain to the telepath's sensitive mind. Morgan had tried repeatedly to help, had time and again risked exposure of his secret in an effort to be of assistance, and every attempt had been curtly rebuffed. It was as if Apollo didn't want help...

Morgan decided in that micron that he'd put up with quite enough. With an irritation that surprised him, he approached Apollo's table.

"You're doing it again, Captain."

"What?" Apollo asked indifferently, not looking up at the man who stood glowering at him.

Morgan sat down, leaned back in his chair, and folded his arms. "Self-pity. It's not very pleasant."

"So?"

"Look, Captain" -- the title was almost a sneer -- "we've put up with your rotten behaviour for better than a section. Even Arion at his most juvenile, his most obnoxious, is more pleasant company than you've been. And I, for one, don't like what you're doing to Diana."

"Diana?" There was a trace of surprised anger in Apollo's voice. "What business is she of yours?"

Morgan slammed his hand down on the table, making the mugs rattle. "Blast you, Apollo! She doesn't belong to you, she's not your property -- and she deserves far better. She's free to make her own choices, but I will not allow you to chain her to a whining, snivelling, self-pitying..."

Apollo got to his feet, trembling with rage. "You won't allow...? You've no right to 'allow,' you meddling, inhuman..."

Outrage brought Morgan to his feet as well, fighting to restrain a fury literally great enough to kill. "Inhuman?" he roared. "Why, you..." He threw himself at Apollo, still struggling to control his rage. Overhead, the lights inexplicably flickered wildly, then began shorting out; glasses shattered, mugs rattled, and various small objects skittered across tables or smashed on the deck as Morgan battled to keep his not-inconsiderable powers under sufficient restraint to avoid killing Apollo outright with the sheer force of his mind. The table crashed to the floor as the two men fought, each driven by



anger and frustration, each finding in violence at least a partial release for the unbearable tensions that had been building for over a sector.

Stunned men and women watched the conflict in amazement, instinctively drawing back from the combatants, giving them room. None of them really had a chance to intervene, for the battle didn't last more than a few centons.

Arzigal, the Hsarri, sensed the impending fight even before it began and, afraid for the welfare of "her" ship, raced toward the Officers' Club to prevent it if she could. Skidding to a stop in the entrance and finding the conflict already in progress, she did the only thing possible -- threw an invisible curtain of energy between the two men.

Apollo and Morgan struck that barrier and rebounded from it, both thrown to the deck by the force of the impact. Apollo lay stunned for a moment, not knowing what had happened. Then he got to his feet and tried to go after Morgan again. Hands grabbed him, held him back as he struggled futilely to free himself.

Morgan knew. He sat on the deck, staring at the white-faced Hsarri in amazement; he'd known there was something different about her, but he'd never suspected... He fought a sudden desire to laugh out loud.

Arzigal stared back in horror, afraid now that, having revealed herself, she'd be rejected and reviled by the humans. Suddenly, as three men grabbed Morgan, she turned to flee, collided with Diana just outside the door, and then, even more frightened, ran down the corridor.

Diana would have gone after her, concerned about the alien who was rapidly becoming a friend, but the chaotic sounds emanating from the Officers' Club demanded her attention. She stood in the entrance, staring in disbelief at Apollo and Morgan.

"What in Hades is going on here?" she demanded in her most official tone.

Half a dozen people started talking at once, none of them very coherently. But the men holding the erstwhile combatants were careful not to relax their grip.

"Enough! Captain Apollo, Lieutenant Morgan, you will both report to me in my quarters in ten centons -- and I expect you both to look considerably more presentable than you do right now!"

Ten centons was just barely enough time for Diana to get her temper under sufficient control to keep from throwing things at the two men as they entered. A quick turbowash and clean uniforms helped, but both men still looked somewhat dishevelled.

Diana glared at them. "All right," she said, her voice icy. "Would you care to tell me what happened?" She turned to Apollo. "Well, Captain?"

He stood silently, not meeting her eyes, looking utterly miserable.



"Lieutenant Morgan?"

Again, silence.

A thoroughly exasperated Diana stared at them, her anger threatening to get the better of her. "Gentlemen, I want an answer. I intend to have one." Her cold formality was a warning neither man could ignore.

Apollo remained silent, not knowing what to say and feeling too embarrassed to try saying anything. Whatever he said would only make things worse.

Morgan cleared his throat nervously. "Uh, Diana..." She glared at him. "Captain," he corrected. "It was just a misunderstanding, that's all. We..."

"I want the truth, Morgan. Don't try to lie to me."

"It is the truth," Apollo said quietly.

Diana shook her head slowly. "I don't believe it. You're an even worse liar than Morgan. But if you both stick to the same story, there's not too much I can do about it."

"Diana," Morgan said, "don't press. It wasn't really much more than a misunderstanding, anyway. Let it go."

"Let it go!" Morgan, more than a dozen people witnessed that 'misunderstanding.' The Officers' Club is a shambles, and everyone's talking about it. Commander Christopher is going to want a report from me, and..." She sighed in resignation. "Oh, very well! I certainly can't force the truth from you. You can go."

Morgan accepted the dismissal without comment, and Diana watched the door slide shut behind him.

Apollo sank down in a chair, his head in his hands, a picture of total despair. Diana regarded him in silence for a moment, her anger fading in the face of his obvious misery.

"Apollo..."

"I'll go, too, Diana," he began, getting to his feet again.

"No, stay," she said gently. When he slumped back in the chair once more, she stepped behind him, her fingers massaging the tense muscles across his shoulders and at the back of his neck. "Commander Christopher is sending us down to a planet our long-range survey teams have been studying. He thinks it might be a good idea for us to get away from the ship for a few days." She bent over him, so her lips brushed his cheek. "Would you like that?"

Apollo shrugged. "I suppose so." He stood up, held her tightly for a moment. "Diana, I...I am sorry. It was a stupid argument, and..."

"Don't, Apollo. It's all right, it's over. I'll make my report, and Command-

er Christopher will issue a reprimand, but as long as it doesn't happen again, it won't matter."

"It does matter, though. I'm a Warrior, Diana; I'm not supposed to lose control like that. And more important, I'm Adama's son. It should never have happened, and it's my fault it did -- and I don't know why it did." His voice was suddenly unsteady. "I don't know what's happening to me, Diana. I wish I'd died on that volcano with Reisa."

Diana reacted as if he'd struck her and pulled away from him, turning so he wouldn't see how deeply his words hurt her. Apollo reached for her, blinded by sudden tears.

"Diana... Diana, I didn't mean it, I..."

She whirled, anger flashing briefly in her eyes. "But you did mean it," she snapped. "That's what's wrong. You can't see all you have to live for; all you can see are reasons for dying." She blinked tears from her eyes. "I don't want to see you die, Apollo. Rather than that, I'd want to be dead myself, so I'd never have to..."

Her words jarred him out of his mood, if only momentarily. "No! Without you..." He grabbed her, holding her so tightly she couldn't breathe, and kissed her, then swept her up in his arms and carried her to the bed.

Diana struggled furiously, trying to escape; her nails drew blood, and he'd carry bruises for days. But Apollo was stronger and easily pinned her to the bed, ripping her uniform from her. After a time, she stopped fighting...

\* \* \* \* \*

Commander Christopher stood before the scanner screen in his quarters and thoughtfully regarded the image it presented. The small landing party was making its final preparations, and Christopher was beginning to have grave misgivings about the wisdom of the entire idea.

He'd never seen Diana so tense, so worried, even in the midst of a massive Cylon attack. She was pale, and looked as if she hadn't had any rest in days. He reflected that she probably hadn't.

Captain Apollo seemed to be spiralling even deeper into a depression that had only one apparent outcome. Christopher shook his head sadly. Driven by grief, remorse, guilt, terribly afraid of bringing danger and possibly death to someone else he loved, Apollo was reaching the limits of his endurance, and it was likely his mind would snap under the strain -- if he didn't kill himself first. That, too, was a possibility. Christopher didn't like either alternative. But a sensitive mind could endure only so much...

And then there was Morgan. Knowing the Lieutenant's deep affection for Diana, and his determination to protect her, Christopher had assigned him to the mission to keep an eye on things, to look after the others, and had told him to choose another Warrior to assist him. Right now, though, it looked like someone was needed to keep an eye on Morgan. The Lieutenant was visibly upset,



angry -- and in Morgan, who seldom showed any outward sign of his emotions, that was dangerous. Very dangerous.

The surprise fourth on the mission was the Hsarri, Arzigal, accompanied by the huge dire wolf who seemed to have adopted her. Christopher didn't understand why Morgan selected her. Granted, she was a good pilot, a competent Warrior -- but there were others who were a lot better. So why her? Besides, the woman looked frightened, downright terrified of something, and she'd been hiding in her quarters, avoiding people for two days, ever since that fight in the Officers' Club.

That was another complication. If Morgan and Apollo were going to fight... Lords, what a mess! And with Morgan able to do some of the awesome things Christopher knew him capable of... Maybe he'd better send someone else along, to keep an eye on all four of them. He went to his desk and signalled the bridge.

"Bridge here, Commander."

"Colonel Arsenaux, who do we have available to fly a shuttle, other than our combat personnel?"

The Executive Officer ran a quick computer check. "Just two," he reported. "That young trader from Aries, and Gunnery Sergeant Jones, sir."

"Jones?" Christopher sighed. Oh, Lords! Still, even Jones was better than a civilian... "Very well. Order Sergeant Jones to report to the launch bay, Colonel. I want him to pilot the landing party."

Centons later, an irate Sergeant Jones marched to the launch bay. He'd had less than two centars' sleep before being roused for this "nut mission," and had nearly decapitated the luckless ensign who'd been sent to wake him. He was grumbling under his breath as he entered the bay.

"Hey, Jones, got your pipes handy?" a tech hissed as he passed. "You're gonna need 'em."

"You're tellin' me? Why do I get stuck with all the loonies?" He patted the pipe case hanging from his belt as he marched on.

Commander Christopher sighed in relief as he watched the shuttle finally launch. "May the Lords of Kobol protect you all," he murmured, "and bring you all back safely -- and well."

The mood aboard the shuttle was hardly that of a group of people on their way to a welcome planetside holiday.

Arzigal huddled at the rear of the shuttle's passenger compartment, as far from everyone else as she could get. Flicka, the dire wolf, was curled in a ball at her feet -- if a massive eight-foot body can curl at anyone's feet. Every now and then, the dire wolf whined faintly in sympathy with the Hsarri's mood. Arzigal wanted to whine, too, but was afraid to draw attention to herself. She sat in silence.



Morgan paced restlessly, trying to channel his still-churning anger and frustration into physical activity. More than once during the flight from the OSIRIS, he paused behind Jones, watching silently as the man directed their small shuttle toward the distant planet -- and more than once, Jones told him to get lost somewhere. If, in those centons, Morgan could have done anything he truly wanted to do, he'd cheerfully have throttled Apollo. And not entirely because of Diana, either. The Captain's depression, his feelings of guilt and self-pity, and his aura of despair were far too intense for the telepath to completely block. Morgan was, to some degree, experiencing what Apollo felt, and he had no way to protect himself from it. So he continued to pace, restlessly, furiously, trying to find some measure of relief in action.

Diana watched Morgan from time to time, but most of her attention was for the man slumped in the seat beside her. In all the yahrens she and Apollo had spent together, first as children and then at the Academy, she'd never seen him like this before. He was moody, withdrawn, depressed -- and becoming more so each day. She knew what Commander Christopher feared, and she'd read Dr. Elara's reports. Always sensitive to Apollo's moods, and to some degree empathic toward him, she understood some of what he was experiencing. And she, too, was afraid.

To an uninformed observer, Apollo would have seemed almost normal. Granted, he looked pale, somewhat haggard, his eyes darkly shadowed. His hands shook slightly, but otherwise the turmoil of emotions so painfully evident to Morgan and Diana wasn't outwardly visible. He sat almost limply in his seat, his eyes closed, and he might have been asleep -- except that he seemed to radiate misery and pain.

"Landing in five centons," Jones warned at last. "Better strap in back there. Remember, I only got one eye."

The landing was quite smooth, considering the unevenness of the terrain. Jones put the shuttle down in a small clearing, neatly fitting the small craft in among the trees along the bank of a small, fast-flowing river. It would make a good site for their encampment.

Flicka was the first off the shuttle, bounding happily into the first truly fresh air she'd ever known. Born aboard the OSIRIS, the dire wolf had never been on a planet before, but she knew the feel of the ground, the smells of nature -- however alien that nature might be to the world of her ancestors.

Arzibal followed the dire wolf. She, too, had never been on a planet, and for her the experience was a little frightening. But she was far more afraid of being parted from her most trusted friend -- and even more afraid of the humans, especially the golden-haired Morgan and the dark, silent Apollo.

Morgan stood in the hatchway, watching the Hsarri follow Flicka across the clearing. He didn't quite understand her, but her psychic powers were unmistakable now that he knew what to look for, and he intended to learn more about her if he could. First, however, there was an encampment to set up. He glanced toward Apollo and Diana, who showed no signs of being ready to leave the shuttle, shrugged, then headed aft to help Jones unload.



Apollo sat with his head resting against the bulkhead behind him, eyes closed. He still looked as if he was asleep, but Diana knew better.

"Apollo? What is it?"

His only answer was to reach out and take her hand tightly in his -- so tightly, in fact, that she winced.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

He shook his head. "I don't know," he replied slowly. "There's something... something strange here. It's as if..." He shrugged, then sighed, trying to ignore a vague premonition of... He didn't know, couldn't identify it.

"As if what, Apollo?"

He shook his head again. "Nothing, I guess. It's not important." He got to his feet. "I'd better help the others."

Less than two centars later, everything was done -- five shelters, lamps powered by the shuttle's generators, cooking and sanitary facilities, all with the shuttle as a base. Arzigal was still off somewhere with the dire wolf. Jones took one surreptitious look at the other three and opted for his own brand of privacy -- he climbed a tree at the edge of the clearing, took out his pipes, and began to play quietly.

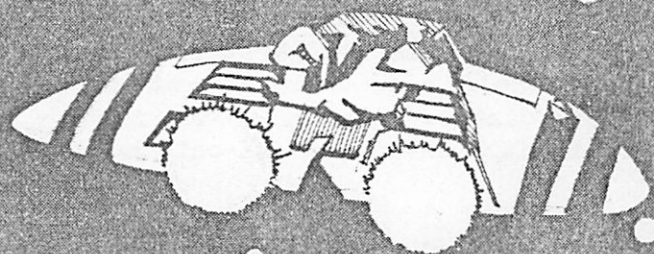
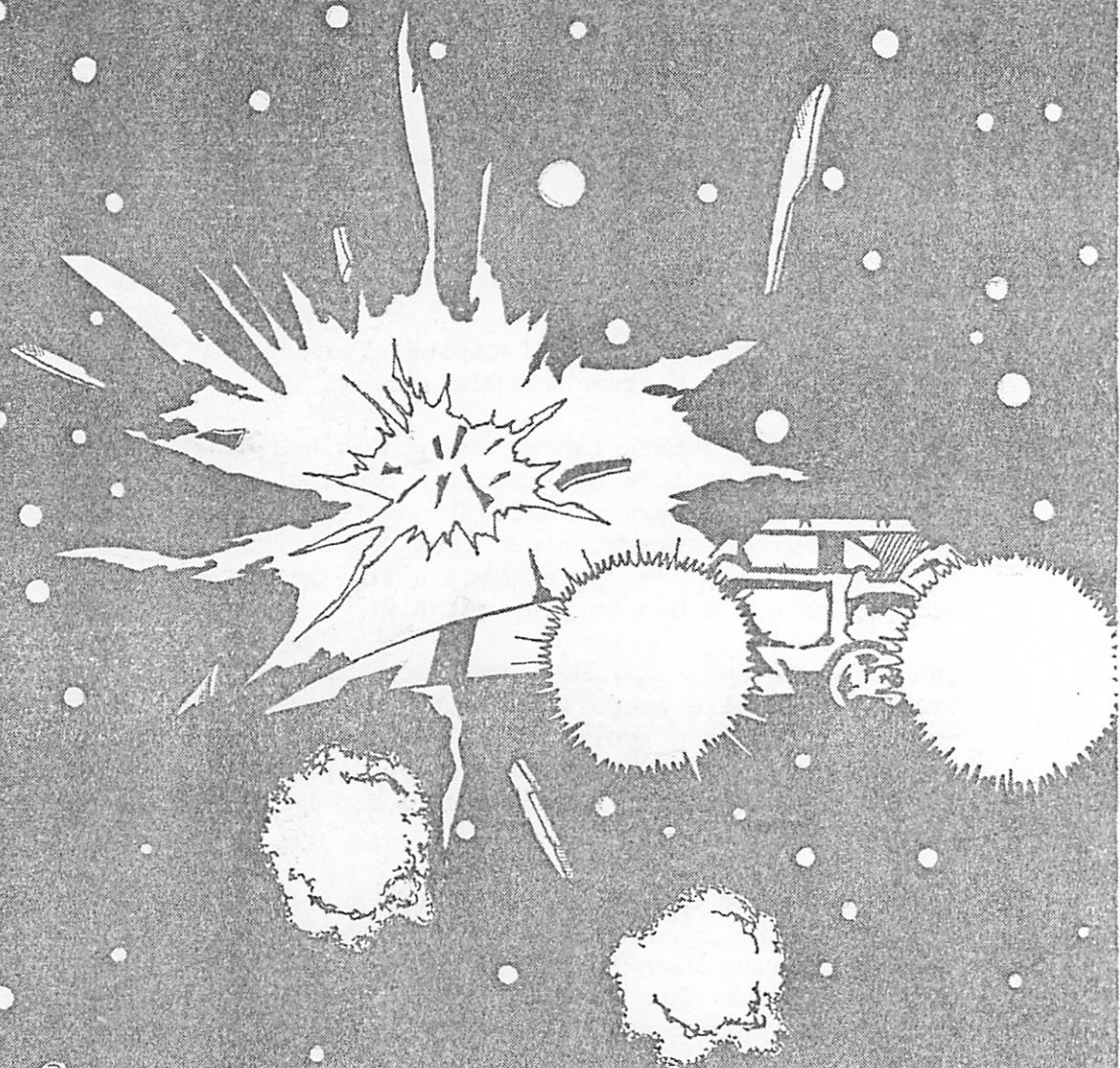
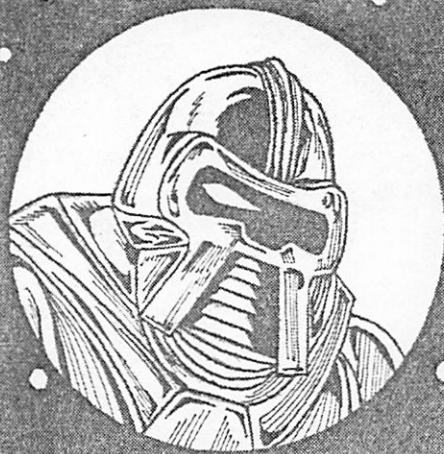
Unable to endure Apollo's mood any longer, Morgan started off through the trees. A little peace was exactly what he needed -- that, and being as far away from Captain Apollo as he could get. Come to think of it, why not get really far away? He closed his eyes, pictured a peaceful and possibly nonexistent forest glade, found that it did indeed exist, and promptly teleported there.

Apollo wandered aimlessly around the small encampment, not sure why he felt so uneasy. Finally, he sank down on a fallen tree near the edge of the clearing and sat staring blankly across the river. Diana stood in the entrance of one of the shelters for a moment, watching him. She started toward him, hesitated, then went back inside. Perhaps it would be wise to leave him alone for a while.

Up in the trees, Jones continued to play his pipes, the music floating soothingly over the clearing.

Apollo didn't hear it. His thoughts were turned inward, focused -- as they had been for much of the last sectar -- on his past. His mind kept creating images of those he'd lost, family and friends who'd died violently at the hands of the Cylons, and he kept reliving their deaths, one after another, sharing their terror and agony, certain he could have saved them if only he'd been with them, if only he'd tried.

Zac, who died when the Cylons sprang their trap, who died alone because Apollo left him in order to carry a warning to the Colonial Fleet, a warning that came too late to prevent the holocaust.



Ila, his mother, dead in the destructive Cylon raid on Caprica that destroyed his home, his world, while he watched helplessly from the bridge of the GALACTICA.

And Serina. Serina, shot down by a Cylon centurion on a world that was the birthplace of all humankind, but more truly a world of death than of life. Serina, whom he loved, who gave his life new meaning and direction. Serina, who died in his arms aboard the GALACTICA, telling him how lucky she felt just to have known him.

Lucky! What a cruel jest! Knowing him was a curse, bringing death, not luck. Apollo choked back a sob, as the memory of Serina's death threatened to overwhelm him. He loved her, swore to share his life with her, and...

Friends shared in that curse. Shimarbron Godas, a living Cylon, who saved his life after a crash, who died saving him a second time -- Shimarbron, a Cylon -- rescuer, teacher, philosopher, friend.

And then Sheba, comrade and friend, who died alone, luring a Cylon patrol away from the Fleet. He should have been with her, would have been except for a minor administrative matter that delayed him on the bridge, causing him to be late for their patrol. Perhaps she should have waited for him, but Sheba was always stubborn and independent...

Apollo buried his face in his hands, sobbing brokenly. One after another, all gone, all dead, all because...

Family, friends, all those he loved. Last of them was Reisa, who sacrificed her life to save him. And she'd never have been in danger, if not for him. He was the one Iblis wanted, not Reisa. Iblis would never have bothered with her, except as a means of revenge.

And what about Boxey? The boy had lost everyone now. His father died before the destruction of Caprica, and his mother... "Oh, Serina," Apollo groaned, brushing away his tears with a shaking hand, "I tried, really, I tried to be a good father... But I was never there, and now I don't know what's going to happen to him. He has no one left..."

No one except Adama, who'd lost both his sons now. The Commander of the GALACTICA mourned every pilot he lost; how much more would he mourn his own son? There was no way Apollo could let his father know he was still alive, no way to ease the old man's pain at yet another loss.

And Starbuck, Starbuck, who was closer than any brother, who'd shared so much of his life, who'd been trusted with that life so many times. They'd played together, lived together, flown and fought together for so long, it was hard to imagine a future without Starbuck. But now he, too, was gone -- and Apollo had no way to tell his friend he was safe.

The GALACTICA would survive without him, Apollo knew. But he had a responsibility to her, to her crew, her pilots. By staying with the OSIRIS, he was in effect abandoning that responsibility. It didn't matter that he had no choice, that he couldn't go back...



And even worse than the past was the prospect of the future, as Apollo's troubled mind created horrible visions of Diana's death, images in which he was always responsible for what happened. He'd had a precognitive vision once before, and never guessed these current images might be different, born of his own fears for the safety of one he loved. The thought of losing Diana as he'd lost Serina became almost an obsession, and something he knew he couldn't bear.

Oh, Lords, if indeed Iblis had killed him once, as Starbuck and Sheba said, why did those beings aboard the ship of lights have to bring him back? Why couldn't they have left him dead, left him in peace? Then Diana'd be safe, and Sheba'd still be alive, and...

Apollo groaned, forced himself to his feet, and stumbled blindly from the clearing, not knowing or caring where he went, trying only to escape -- from himself, from his memories, from the future.

Diana, emerging from the shelter, saw him disappear into the trees and took careful note of the direction in which he headed, but she didn't follow him. Something held her back; somehow, she knew he wanted -- needed -- to be alone.

From his vantage point above the encampment, Jones kept watch. Arzigal and the dire wolf hadn't gone very far and were still marginally in sight if one knew where to look. Morgan had vanished, but then, Jones was pretty sure the Lieutenant could take care of himself. Diana remained in the camp, and while her movements betrayed her tension, the watcher thought she'd be all right, at least for the present. And Apollo, whom Jones privately regarded as more than a little mad, was sitting by the river a short distance upstream, apparently doing nothing.

That first day set the pattern for the next three as well. Each night, everyone returned to the encampment -- Morgan, Arzigal, and Jones to their own shelters, to sleep if they could; Apollo to Diana's, seeking what peace he could find in her arms. Each morning found Arzigal and Morgan off again, each seeking peace in solitude. Diana seldom strayed far from the camp, and often gazed sadly after Apollo as he wandered listlessly along the riverbank. Jones simply kept watch.

The fourth night was different. Arzigal and Flicka returned as always -- reluctantly, but with the Hsarri seeming more at ease as each day passed, more willing to be near the others. Morgan was suddenly just there. But Apollo didn't come back.

"He's probably just fallen asleep down by the river," Morgan told the worried Diana, trying to reassure her.

She shook her head. "No, not this late. He wouldn't stay after dark. Besides, he doesn't sleep much any more. Something's wrong, Morgan, I'm sure of it."

"Then we'll find him." Morgan turned toward the tree that had become Jones' favourite perch. "Jones, can you see Captain Apollo from up there?"



"Nope," the answer floated back. "Last time I saw him, he was headed upstream, maybe three, four centars ago. He could've gone anywhere after that."

Morgan took a deep breath to prepare himself and reached out silently, deliberately trying to touch the troubled mind he'd been avoiding so carefully for days. He found nothing. "We'd better go after him," he said, trying to hide his concern. "Arzibal, is that oversized daggit any good as a tracker?"

The Hsarri shook her head.

So much for doing things the easy way. "Diana, Arzibal, I want you to search away from the river. He may have wandered off that way. Jones, you go upstream. And, Diana," he added, taking her hand for a micron, "we will find him, I promise you."

Following a totally groundless hunch, Morgan began his search downstream from the camp. He followed the riverbank closely, staying within a couple of feet of the water and searching the bushes carefully.

Apollo was lying face down on the grass at the water's edge, some three or four miles downriver. Morgan guessed he'd collapsed while kneeling to drink; his body was half in the water, one arm outflung, and he'd missed drowning by inches. He was unconscious and appeared to be in deep shock, his breathing shallow, his pulse weak and rapid, his skin colder than the icy water in which he lay. Aside from a deep cut on his forehead, where his head had struck a small rock, there were no visible signs of injury, and Morgan could detect no broken bones.

The telepath knelt beside Apollo, examining him as he silently ordered the others back to camp. Then he gathered the limp body into his arms and teleported back to the clearing. There was no time for subtlety.

Jones was just entering the clearing, and looked more than a little surprised to see Morgan suddenly appear out of nowhere with the unconscious Apollo in his arms. The pieces of the puzzle Lieutenant Morgan represented immediately fell into place.

"Jones, get me the med kit! Hurry!" Morgan ordered as he carried Apollo into the nearest of the shelters. "And bring some blankets!"

By the time Jones emerged from the shuttle with everything Morgan wanted, Diana and Arzibal were back as well. No one had time to even wonder at the silent summons to return -- a summons Diana knew well, and one neither Jones nor Arzibal had thought to ignore. There was too much to do -- and far too little time.

All Warriors were trained in basic first aid, and Jones knew far more than the average because of his work with the OSIRIS crash crews. But none of the standard treatments resulted in any improvement. In fact, Apollo's condition rapidly worsened. His temperature suddenly rose alarmingly, his pulse weakened, and his breathing became more and more laboured. His hold on life seemed to grow weaker with each passing centon.

"He doesn't want to live," Diana said tonelessly.

"Maybe," Morgan replied. "But he has a lot to live for, and he's a bigger fool than I'd have guessed if he doesn't know it."

"If we could just get him back to the OSIRIS..."

"I wish we could, Diana, but there's no time. It'll take over six centars in the shuttle, and I can't teleport anywhere near far enough." He didn't say the obvious -- in the six centars it would take to reach the OSIRIS by shuttle, Apollo would be dead. "Whatever is to be done, we'll have to do here, on our own."

"If we only knew what happened," Arzigal said, "we might be able to do something for him. But he does not appear to have been hurt, and..."

"Enough 'ifs' already," Jones interrupted, reaching for his pipes. "We need facts, and you two" -- he looked knowingly from Arzigal to Morgan -- "can get them."

Arzigal looked horrified. "No!" She shook her head vehemently. "What you are suggesting, it cannot be done!"

Morgan, however, nodded very slowly. "Of course," he murmured. "I can't do it myself; he's delirious, and I haven't the power to penetrate his illusions, but with help... Yes, I think it can be done. With another mind..." He turned to the Hsarri, his voice pleading. "Arzigal, link with me, your mind with mine. Together, maybe we can..."

"No! No! I am not like you. I am Hsarri, different, meant to be a ship-mother. Now, you will hate me, cast me out!"

Diana caught the other woman's shoulders in a painfully tight grip. "Hate you? Arzigal, you can help save his life! How can anyone hate you for that?" She blinked, tears burning her eyes. "You've got to try. Please, Arzigal, help him. Please!"

The others waited silently as the frightened Hsarri hesitated, then nodded reluctant acquiescence. Diana and Jones watched in awe as Morgan reached out, took Arzigal's hand in his, and closed his eyes, willing himself to relax, to shut out everything around him. Peace seemed to radiate from him, to touch each of them. Arzigal, too, closed her eyes. Silence, broken only by Apollo's feverish moans and harsh, ragged breathing, spread over the encampment.

After a seemingly endless time, Morgan moved, stretching out his free hand and placing it lightly on Apollo's forehead. Apollo flinched, whimpering as if in pain, but Morgan didn't react; his eyes remained closed, his face utterly devoid of expression. Beside him, Arzigal sighed, but did nothing to break the link between them.

Diana watched in silence, Apollo's right hand clasped tightly between hers. Jones looked from one to another, then raised his pipes and began to play





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softly. The music seemed somehow to deepen the peace of the clearing, to intensify the stillness.

Morgan's voice shattered the silence, but not the sense of peace. "There's no way to be absolutely certain what happened to Apollo," he said in a low voice. "But one of his last memories before he lost consciousness is of a small animal..."

Apollo was sitting under a tree by the river, a little farther from the encampment than his wanderings usually took him. For once, he was almost at peace, relaxed by the quiet, the gentle breeze, the slow ripples in the water. He leaned back against the tree, absently studying the changing shapes of the clouds high above him. His eyes closed almost of their own accord, and he was nearly asleep when he sensed something watching him. Instantly alert, he reached for his laser pistol even before his eyes were open.

If he were standing, the little creature's head would barely reach his knees. It sat with its head cocked, looking at him with large, almost intelligent eyes. The brown-furred face was sharply pointed, the ears large and erect. A bushy tail curled neatly around broad paws.

This was the strangest dream... Apollo smiled faintly. "Hello," he said pleasantly. "Lovely day, isn't it?"

The creature hopped closer, apparently intrigued by the sound of his voice. Apollo held out his hand, and long whiskers tickled his palm as the creature sniffed curiously. Then a warm tongue rasped across his fingers, and Apollo found himself petting the furry head as the creature curled up against his side. He closed his eyes again, dozing in the warm sunlight, feeling better than he had in over a sector.

Suddenly Apollo shivered, inexplicably cold, and reeled against the tree as he staggered to his feet. Dizzy, he clung to it for a moment, trying to understand what was happening to him. He felt terribly sick, couldn't see clearly -- or even think clearly -- and he'd felt fine only microns ago... He stumbled toward the river, thinking some water might help. The world seemed to darken, and blackness swept over him...

"...and he apparently collapsed as he knelt to drink," Morgan concluded. "I suspect some sort of toxin native to this planet, harmless to the local fauna but highly dangerous to us. I don't know whether it acts as a contact poison or if it entered his system through a scratch or cut, but I think, since we know this much, that Arzigal and I can slow its effects long enough to get him back to the OSIRIS."

"We'd better hurry, then," Diana said. "We can leave all the equipment..."

"No, we're going to be a few centons yet," Morgan told her. "There's something else I want to do."

Morgan, with Arzigal reinforcing him, went back into Apollo's mind, this time seeking beyond the memories of recent events, probing into the past. He found the details of Reisa's death, then Sheba's, Serina's, and the others, and he



learned the intensity of Apollo's fears for Diana. The problem, he saw, was not in the memories themselves, but in Apollo's view of them. If he could somehow provide a proper sense of perspective...

"Diana," he said quietly, holding out his hand, "join us. There's much I think you should know..."

She put her hand trustingly in his, and found herself in a place she couldn't describe, surrounded by the thoughts and memories of others. Morgan guided her then -- into Apollo's mind, into his memories, his fears, his hopes. She knew why Morgan felt this was so necessary, realised it was essential for her to know and understand what was behind Apollo's mental disturbance. She'd been aware of his grief, his remorse, his concern for her, all the rest of the storm of emotions assailing him; what she hadn't realised was the intensity of his feelings. Knowing that, she began to truly understand...

"Now," Morgan's quiet voice seemed to whisper in her mind, "we'll see about doing something to help him."

Diana suddenly found herself back in the world her body had never left, as Morgan and Arzigal tried to heal Apollo's mind. It seemed to take a very long time. Morgan had first to overcome his own reluctance to interfere, his deep concern that his personal feelings would prejudice his efforts. Diana reached for Apollo's hand again, holding it tightly, trying somehow to let him know she was there, to will him to live, to want to live.

"That's it," Morgan said at last, opening his eyes. "The rest will have to wait until we're back aboard the OSIRIS."

"He'll be all right?"

"No guarantees, Diana. First, they'll have to get all the toxin out of his system, then they'll have to worry about chemical balances and the like. Right now, though, we've got to keep him alive long enough for Senbi and his crew to get to him." He paused, studying her pale, worried face. "I won't lie to you, Diana. I know, better than anyone, just how much Apollo means to you. But you have to accept that he may die. I'd say Arzigal and I have perhaps one chance in ten of getting him back to the OSIRIS alive."

"I see," she said. Her voice was surprisingly steady, but her face was ashen.

"If Apollo makes it that far," Morgan continued, "he's got an even chance of surviving." He paused again.

"Go on, Morgan, what else?"

"If he lives, there's still a chance we failed just now. It's possible our tampering with his mind did more harm than good. I've never tried anything like this before, so I don't know. I don't think so, but there's still a possibility... He may come out of this totally insane."

Diana's eyes widened in horror.

Morgan shook her gently. "I said there's a possibility, Diana. It's a very remote one, but you've got to realise it exists."

"But..."

"Now, don't go to pieces on me over remote possibilities, Captain. Okay?"

She nodded, forcing a smile. "Okay, Morgan, I'll be all right." She took a deep breath, willing herself to be calm. "How soon do you want to launch?"

"As soon as possible." He turned to the others. "Jones, how soon can you have the shuttle ready?"

"If you don't care about the gear from the camp, we can go right now."

"Forget the equipment," Diana ordered.

Jones ran for the shuttle. At a signal from Arzigal, the dire wolf followed. Diana and the Hsarri stayed with Morgan.

Apollo moaned, whimpering in pain again as Morgan carefully lifted him from the cot and carried him to the shuttle. Diana wrapped a blanket around him, then sat on the deck with his head in her lap, smoothing his sweat-damp hair, as Morgan and Arzigal went back into their telepathic rapport. None of them noticed the launch.

*And none of them noticed the small, brown-furred creature with the large erect ears who sat at the edge of the clearing with its bushy tail curled neatly around its broad paws, watching their departure with large, almost intelligent eyes.*

\* \* \* \* \*

The six centars it took to reach the OSIRIS seemed interminable. It took nearly all their strength for Morgan and Arzigal to slow the effects of the alien toxin enough to keep Apollo alive, and despite their best efforts his condition gradually deteriorated. His temperature dropped drastically, then suddenly soared again; his heart faltered, its rhythm broken, and his pulse weakened to where it was barely detectable. Twice, he actually stopped breathing.

But he was still alive when they reached the OSIRIS. A med crew was waiting, and Apollo was in an emergency support chamber less than a centon after the shuttle landed. Morgan and Arzigal were both on the verge of collapse, and Dr. Senbi ordered them to Life Centre for some enforced rest. Jones followed, his pipes in his hand.

Diana refused to leave Apollo's side, even when she received a direct order to report at once to Commander Christopher. He called Life Centre, but she wouldn't even go to the scanner. Then he demanded to talk to Dr. Senbi.

The medical officer gave him a quick but reasonably comprehensive report. "Captain Apollo is unconscious and in deep shock, caused by a systemic toxin

of alien nature. In addition, he has been suffering from a severe mental disturbance. His condition is temporarily stabilised, but he is very weak."

"I see. How soon will he recover?"

"Recover? Commander, I still don't know if he's going to survive. That's why I'm allowing Captain Diana to stay with him. If he regains consciousness, she may be able to help."

"How?"

"He loves her. Sometimes that's enough to give a man the will to live."

Christopher regarded the face on the scanner screen silently for several microns. "Senbi, take care of them for me, will you? Both of them?"

"I will, Commander," the doctor promised. "Don't worry, we'll all do our best."

The best the medical staff of the OSIRIS could do was very good indeed. Apollo was unconscious for nearly four days, but Senbi wasn't overly alarmed. His patient's vital signs had finally stabilised, and all traces of the toxin had been flushed from his system. He was breathing normally and no longer required artificial life support. He was still seriously ill, but he'd live -- and, although it would take some time, he would recover.

Morgan checked on Apollo several times, but he couldn't really be sure of anything until the Captain regained consciousness. Meanwhile, the telepath put his time to good use -- he spent much of it with Arzigal, each of them learning a great deal about the other and about the other's people. It was an interesting -- and highly rewarding -- experience for them both.

Diana was alone with Apollo, curled in a chair beside his bed. She hadn't left his side for more than a couple of centons, hadn't really slept since they'd been back. She was utterly exhausted -- but she wouldn't leave him.

Apollo opened his eyes, blinked a couple of times. His head ached badly, and the light hurt; he couldn't see clearly. He closed his eyes again, waited a few microns, then opened them once more. A bit dizzy, he focused rather fuzzily on the figure in the chair, but could see only a hazy blur, like an open flame. He tried to lift a hand to rub his eyes and found he hadn't the strength to move. "Diana?"

The hoarse whisper drew her attention at once. "Apollo! Thank the Lords...!" Sobbing in relief, she knelt beside him, kissing him, her hand cool against his cheek. "I was so afraid..."

Somehow, he found the strength to raise his hand, to touch her hair. "It's all right, Diana," he murmured weakly. "Everything's all right now." He sighed, and his hand dropped limply to his side.

Diana raised her head to look directly into his eyes. "Is it?" she asked very quietly. "Is it really?" Apollo looked bewildered, and she smoothed his hair

tenderly, lovingly. "Never mind, Apollo," she said, her voice gentle. She took his hand. "How do you feel?"

"Terrible." He grinned weakly. "But I imagine I'll get over it." His tone was light, but his voice was a little unsteady, and he sighed wearily, closing his eyes for a moment.

"Would you like me to call Dr. Senbi?"

Apollo shook his head slightly. "No, I'm just a little tired." His fingers tightened briefly over hers. "Diana, what happened to me?"

"Don't you remember?"

"Not really. I remember the planet, and wandering around a lot, feeling miserable, but not much else." He sighed. "Something must've happened, though, or I wouldn't be here, feeling like I've been run over by a landram."

"We don't know for sure," Diana told him. "Morgan found you unconscious. It was some sort of toxin, a severe reaction to an alien protein of some kind. You almost died."

"That's not exactly what I mean. I feel, I don't know, as if I've somehow rethought everything that's happened the past few yahrens. Everything looks, well, different somehow." He tried to sit up, but was too weak.

Diana pushed him back down on the bed. "Lie still," she said with mock severity. "You should rest. Try to sleep."

"No, later, let me finish. It's important..." He paused, marshalling his thoughts. "I thought once that I couldn't live with what's happened, that I'd be better off dead, that everyone'd be better off. When I saw you again, I was terrified of something happening to you because of me. I couldn't bear it. Now..." His voice trailed off.

She touched his cheek lightly. "Maybe some day you'll find out what happened," she said softly.

"You know, don't you?"

Diana hesitated, not sure Apollo was ready for an explanation of what had been done, of what Morgan and Arzigal were. She shook her head. "Not now, Apollo. Please. Maybe later, when you..."

"Please, Diana. I feel as if I've been pushed to the edge of an abyss, and somehow at the last micron saved from falling. I've got to know."

With a sigh, she tried to think how to tell him. "Apollo, do you remember when you tried to find Serina?" she began thoughtfully. When he nodded, she went on. "Morgan can do certain things... He..."

"He was the one, wasn't he? The one who brought us back?"



"Yes..."

"He's a telepath, isn't he?"

"Yes, but how...?"

"It's pretty obvious, the only plausible explanation for a lot of things."

"He doesn't pry into other people's thoughts," Diana said defensively.

"I never accused him of anything," Apollo replied. "But he did know things about me that..."

"He had to find out, Apollo. He was trying to help you. We all were."

"I'll grant him that. I'm willing to admit he did what he did with the best of motives. Now, what I want to know is, what did he do?"

Diana sighed. "We didn't have enough time to get you back to the OSIRIS; you'd have died long before we got here. So Morgan and Arzigal..."

"She's a telepath, too?"

"No, not exactly... Well, sort of..."

"Never mind. Go on."

"Well, they linked together, and Morgan tried to find out what happened to you, hoping to heal you if he could. They found out about the toxin and were able to slow its effects; I don't know how. And you know the rest, I guess."

"No, Diana, I don't. What did they do to my mind?"

The question took her by surprise. "What?"

"Look, Diana, don't play games with me. I know something happened. I want to know what."

"I don't know," she answered, close to tears. "Honestly. I don't understand what happened. Morgan said something about perspective, that's all. He wouldn't tamper..."

"Maybe. But he did something."

"Apollo, he..."

"Hey, I'm not accusing him of anything, remember? I'm just trying to understand it myself, that's all. Somehow, everything looks so different, so..."

Worried, Diana stared at him. "What do you mean?"

"Morgan's 'perspective,' maybe. I don't know exactly. But I think maybe I'm just a little grateful to him, to both of them. Whatever they did..." He

smiled faintly. "I've lived with death all my life, Diana, and I've never been afraid of it, not for myself. Until, well, not too very long ago, I think I'd have welcomed it, in fact. But I'm not ready to die, not yet, not any more."

Diana regarded him searchingly, wanting to believe what his words implied, but afraid to, afraid of being wrong. Was he well again -- not physically yet, but mentally?

Apollo smiled again, a weak and tired smile that nevertheless told her what words could not. His hand gripped hers tightly. "No, I've got far too much to live for now."

\* \* \* \* \*

For the next several days, Diana spent most of her time in Life Centre with Apollo. He slept a great deal, slowly recovering a little of his strength; when he was awake, he lay quietly, clinging to Diana's hand as if afraid she'd leave him. He wasn't afraid, though -- he knew she wouldn't leave, knew, with a confidence that surprised him, that nothing would ever part them again.

But he liked having her there. Her presence was somehow reassuring, and something more. He liked listening to her voice, as she told him some of the adventures of the OSIRIS during the past several yahrens. As she told them, the stories were fascinating, alive -- or maybe it was just that she was fascinating. Her voice was music, the touch of her hand a caress...

With Commander Christopher's approval, Dr. Senbi permitted Diana to remain in Life Centre with Apollo, ordering a cot brought in for her so she, too, could get some rest. And Diana found herself sleeping far more peacefully than she had in yahrens. It was good to have Apollo back, to see him smile again, to hear him laugh. Above all, it was good to see him free of that searing emotional pain...

Several days later, Commander Christopher reluctantly had to order Diana back to duty. Purple Squadron functioned flawlessly under Morgan's temporary command, but the ship was dangerously shorthanded. The Squadron -- and the OSIRIS -- needed Diana more than Apollo did.

Diana accepted the order with a noticeable lack of enthusiasm. Although she acknowledged Apollo was out of immediate danger, she'd still have preferred to stay with him in case he needed her. Apollo, too, would have liked to have her close by, but in a way he welcomed the chance to be by himself. He had a great deal to think about, and he needed to be alone for a while.

A couple of sections after his arrival aboard the OSIRIS, he'd started a personal log, recording some of his thoughts, his impressions in a small portion of the near-infinite memory banks of the battlestar's computer. Now, for the first time, he was free to listen to what he'd already recorded, to think out loud and then listen again to his own ideas about the past. The recorded thoughts were rambling, disjointed, often repetitious, and at times he found it extremely difficult to believe some of the words were his own...

I know I can't go back, but I still find myself wishing I was with the Fleet, the GALACTICA. Nearly everything I have left is there -- my family, all my friends... My father, Boxey, Starbuck, Boomer...

Now there's Diana. It's been yahrens since I last saw her, but she's as beautiful as ever, no, more beautiful. And she's older, wiser, but then, she was always wise, even when she was a child, and I think I loved her even then. As long as I still have her, I have some kind of future. I remember...

Lords, must they all die? If anything happens to Diana... Oh, dear God, I'm so afraid for her...

\* \* \* \* \*

It's not easy, trying to lay a ghost, or ghosts, to rest. I know there's no way anyone else can gain access to this record, but knowing and accepting aren't quite the same, at least not yet...

What's past is past. I tried to bring Serina back once, yahrens ago, and failed. I nearly destroyed myself trying -- and Diana, too. How can I risk that again?

And Sheba... Sheba died as she always wanted to, fighting the Cylons. Only I wasn't there. If I had been, I think I'd have willingly died with her. I was so tired then, tired of life, tired of... Oh, I don't know, of everything, I suppose.

I don't think I ever loved her, certainly not as she wanted me to, not as she loved me, or I, Serina. But she was something more than just a friend, and her death, after Serina's, left me empty, drained of all feeling...

\* \* \* \* \*

Morgan... He's strange, different, both scientist and Warrior, but always scientist first, I think. I find myself liking him, trusting him, and I'm not sure why. Maybe it's because Diana seems so fond of him, though why that should make me like the man...

Morgan knows about Iblis -- and I don't know how. Certainly I never told him, and what I told Diana, yahrens ago, was like in a dream, not real, except...

Morgan seems to know a lot of things he can't possibly know, things I never told Diana, things that happened yahrens later. It's as if he's pulling thoughts from my...

But that's impossible! Iblis...? No, he's not Iblis, I'm sure of that. Morgan has no taint of evil, he's...

The more I learn, the more I think about what's happened these past sections, the less I seem to know. There's so much I don't understand...

\* \* \* \* \*



The OSIRIS is so like the GALACTICA, maybe too much like her. And maybe that's what's wrong, why I keep feeling so lost. I don't know what I'd do if Diana weren't here. She makes me feel as if there's some reason for living, for trying to go on...

I love her so much, I almost can't bear it. Without her, I have nothing, no one. When I think of all the things that could happen to her... When I tried to find Serina, when Diana and I were so lost in that void, when someone came and led...

Morgan! By all the Lords of Kobol, it was Morgan! He was the one who led us back, who saved us. No wonder he seems so familiar, so... But how...?

What in Hades is he? How could he have found us, guided us, when we couldn't find a way out ourselves? He's a friend -- I know that, have known it, I think, almost since I met him. But who is he? What is he? And why...?

\* \* \* \* \*

I've spent the better part of three sections doing nothing, absolutely nothing. Oh, Diana's shown me all around the ship, and I've permission to go wherever I want, except private quarters, but I still don't have anything to do, nothing useful, no purpose.

I'm not allowed to fly yet, even though Dr. Senbi says my shoulder's healed nicely. No one will say it, but I think the doctors are afraid I'll try to go back to the GALACTICA, or...

\* \* \* \* \*

I couldn't sleep last night. Whenever I tried, I kept seeing Serina, Sheba, so many others, all hurt, all dead, because of me. I might as well have killed Zac myself, leaving him to the Cylons, and Serina... She'd never have been there on Kobol, if not for me. And...

Oh, Diana, Diana, why must I always be a source of pain for those I love? Serina's dead. Zac died because I left him, and if I'd been there, Sheba'd probably be alive now, too. I've done enough harm. I can't risk hurting you, too...

I've got to leave, but I don't know where I can go, how I can get away. If I take a Viper, try to find a planet somewhere, they'll just come after me, but what else...?

Oh, Lords, help me to know what to do...

Alone for centars at a time, confined to a bed in Life Centre, Apollo had little else to do, so he spent much of his time with the computer. Morgan told him something of what happened to him, but his own memories were hazy, perhaps mercifully so. He recalled the planet where he'd nearly died only vaguely, but had distinct memories of sitting for centars by a river. And he remembered a small, friendly animal; then only blackness, loneliness, nightmare -- the same nightmare he'd lived with for yahrens, ever since Zac died.

Now, alone with the OSIRIS computer, Apollo remembered the past -- and realised it would never be a nightmare again.

I've been listening to some of what I recorded over the past few sections, and some of it, well, it's rather surprising. A little frightening, too. The voice, the thoughts are those of a stranger. I know it's me, but...

I was sick and badly hurt, and I guess things just got progressively worse. Diana, Morgan, I don't know how they put up with me. It must've been nearly intolerable for them. I don't think I could've done it, but then, I don't like myself -- the person I was, that is -- very well. I guess friends, real friends, are those who'll stay by you, even when...

I think, from the sound of it, that I was very close to killing myself...

Anyway, since I'm not allowed out of bed yet, I've finally got a chance to go back and listen to what I said, think about it -- and I really don't know what to think of some of it. But I've finally come to realise just how sick I actually was.

Diana explained something of what happened, and Morgan's told me a lot more. I know grave circumstances sometimes require grave actions, but still... It's hard to accept, somehow, the idea of someone else inside my head, reading my thoughts, knowing how I feel about everything I've ever experienced. Not only that, the idea's more than a little frightening, too...

No, not frightening so much as horrifying. It makes you feel, well, violated somehow, as if your innermost self has been exposed for the world to see, as if your soul has been stripped bare and studied like some kind of alien organism. I don't like it. I don't even like the idea of it.

Still, I've come to know Morgan now, at least a little, and I trust him. I don't know why, maybe because of Diana, but I think he's someone who can be trusted for all eternity. He'll never betray a trust, never pry...

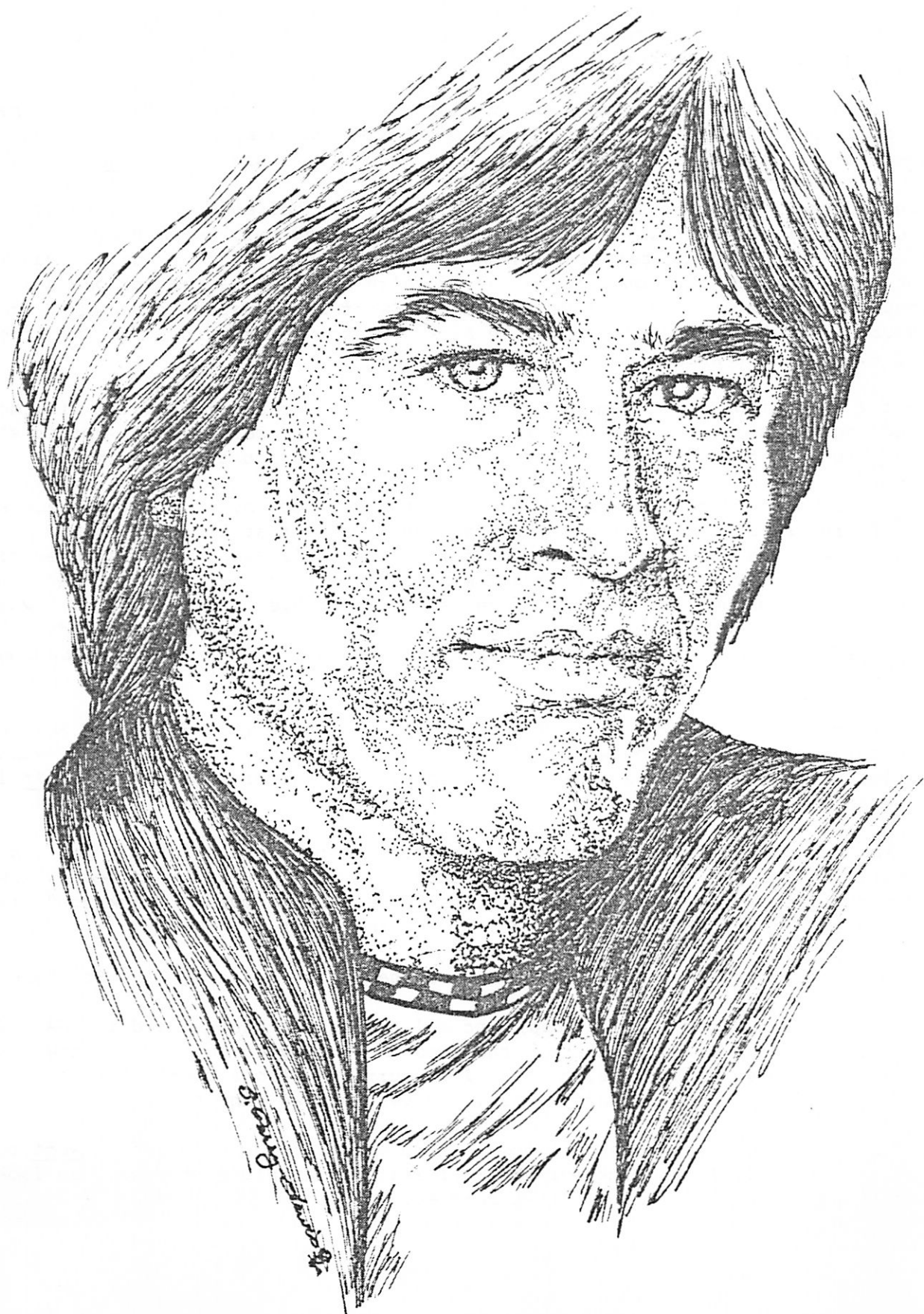
I can't explain it, can't even try -- I don't know how to begin. The very concept of telepathy is hard for me to accept, even now, even with proof. Oh, I know Count Iblis could read minds, could move objects at a distance, could do all sorts of things. But Iblis isn't even remotely human, no matter what his outward appearance. He's evil personified.

But Morgan's not, and I think I've always known it. I don't know why I'm so sure there's a difference. Maybe it's what my father told me of his experiments back on Caprica, maybe it's just knowing Morgan, but I'm sure in my own mind that telepathy itself isn't evil. It can be used for evil purposes, but I think -- I know -- it can also be used for good.

Anyway, I know Morgan can do what he's done, and yet I don't know, don't understand...

How can I express what I feel? Morgan did far more than just save my life; he saved my sanity as well. I know how I felt about everything before, and I know how I feel now. Nothing's changed, really, except that now I know it







wasn't my fault, that I couldn't have changed things. I can mourn, but without guilt.

I guess the real difference is that I'm not living in the past any more, obsessed by it. I feel really alive again, for the first time in yahrens, maybe for the first time since Serina died.

There's a lot I don't know about what's happened to me. Maybe I'll never know. But I'm alive, and my life has purpose and meaning again, not just to me, but to others I care about as well. And I can care now, I can love...

Yahrens ago, when the OSIRIS was long overdue and believed lost, I thought I'd never see Diana again. But I never stopped loving her, even though I loved Serina, too. It's eternal somehow, and different even from what it was when we were younger, back on Caprica, as if we're even more a part of one another. Maybe it's because of what we've shared, what we've experienced since then. Maybe it's because she's given me back a reason for living, for wanting to live. I don't know.

But I love Diana, and I'm not afraid to say it, or ashamed. I'm willing to say the words for all the universe to hear. I love her, and I want to share my life with her -- and I thank all the Lords I've found her again.

And Morgan... I need someone I can talk to, confide in, trust at my back even as I trusted Starbuck, and I think Morgan can be that kind of friend. He's put up with so much, risked so much for me... He's saved my life three times now that I know of -- first when I was lost, hunting for Serina; then when he and Arion rescued me, when I wanted so badly to die; and again now, when I think I came so close to willing myself to die. I suppose in effect he's dragged me from a kind of abyss, like I told Diana, saving my life, saving me from madness...

And Morgan and Diana? Well, I suppose it's a little like Sheba and me, only deeper, beginning with two people who'd lost so much, both lonely, vulnerable... And knowing Diana, well, I think I'd be surprised if they didn't love one another.

I know I can never repay Morgan, can never properly thank him. How can you thank someone you owe your very existence? How do you say to someone, how do you put into words, the kind of things I feel? A simple "thank you" isn't enough. I don't know what to say, or how to say it...

There are debts like that, debts that can never be repaid. Like Starbuck...

I'll miss him, and Boomer, too, and all the others back aboard the GALACTICA -- my father, Boxey, Athena, the guys in the Squadron... But now I know they'll survive without me, just as I'll survive without them. None of us can turn back time, however hard we try, however much we want to.

I know it, and I can accept it now -- and what's more, I no longer want to go back. Instead, I can look forward -- forward to a future that somehow looks a lot brighter than I ever realised before...



# JOURNEY'S END

## JOURNEY'S END

(By Joy Harrison)

Apollo's release from Life Centre was the occasion of a major celebration in the OSIRIS Officers' Club. He didn't suspect a thing, and when he entered, walking a little unsteadily between Diana and Morgan, he was nearly stunned by the cheers.

Morgan chuckled as Apollo turned to him in bewilderment. "Seems you're a bit more popular than you realised, Captain."

"But why...?"

"Apollo, at least half the Warriors aboard this ship know who you are, where you're from, what you've done. You're something of a hero to them, so you may as well accept it." Diana smiled affectionately, sliding an arm around his waist.

"But I'm no hero," he protested.

"No? You want to argue with them?" She gestured toward the raucous Warriors.

"Lords," Apollo groaned in mock despair, "what did I ever do to deserve...?"

He didn't finish. Diana giggled, Morgan laughed out loud, and their merriment was contagious. Laughing, happy, genuinely carefree for the first time in a long, long while, Apollo surrendered to the festive mood.

When he could finally free himself from the throng of well-wishers who flocked around the entrance -- most of whom he'd never met before -- he made his way across the room, one arm around Diana's shoulders, and found an empty table. Morgan deposited enough ambrosia in front of them to intoxicate the three of them several times over; then, with a cheerful grin, and a blown kiss for Diana, he disappeared into the crowd. He emerged again only centons later with a hesitant Arzigal in tow. Flicka, the dire wolf, followed the Hsarri and tried -- in vain -- to stow her large, furry body under the table. The attempt was disastrous.

As they cleaned up the mess, a young Warrior approached them, looking a little unsure of himself. "Uh, Captain Diana..."

"Arion!" She smiled warmly and turned to Apollo. "This is Sergeant Arion, the Warrior who found you and brought you to the OSIRIS. I don't think you've

actually met him before, although I know you've heard about him."

Apollo got to his feet. "I'd like to thank you, Sergeant. I'm sorry I wasn't able to before. I owe you my life."

"I just wish I'd gotten there sooner, sir, so I could've helped the lady who was with you."

For a micron, grief clouded Apollo's happiness. "It wasn't meant to be," he murmured. Then Diana put her hand lightly on his arm, and he smiled. "No matter now. Won't you join us for a drink, Sergeant?"

Arion hesitated, then shook his head. "Thank you, sir, but I'd better not. My wife's waiting for me, and..."

"Then you'd best not keep her waiting," Apollo laughed, sitting down again. "Go on. And, Sergeant, thanks again."

Arion retreated hastily, and Morgan chuckled as he explained to Apollo, "Arion was sealed to a pretty engineer named Cassandra several yahrens ago, but he's still young, and just a bit afraid of her."

Apollo laughed again. "Just a bit? He reminds me of an old friend, who's terrified of the women in his life." He smiled at Diana, then hugged her briefly. "Starbuck's been running from my sister for yahrens. Now, he's got two women after him. One day, like our young Arion, he'll get caught..." The thought of a tamed Starbuck was too absurd. Apollo was laughing too hard to continue, and Diana joined him.

Around them, the party got into full swing. Ale and ambrosia flowed freely, and someone -- identified for Apollo as Lieutenant Pandora -- began a pyramid game. The whole affair was rapidly beginning to resemble a Blue Squadron festivity aboard the GALACTICA, and Apollo found himself feeling very much at home and, strangely enough, not at all homesick.

Then a small, dark-haired woman -- Ananke, a cultural survey tech -- produced a stringed musical instrument native to some distant world the OSIRIS once explored. Other instruments appeared, and soon several people were singing. Diana leaned against Apollo's arm, her head resting lightly on his shoulder, and began to quietly hum Ananke's tune.

Apollo recognised the tune but was unsure of the words. He listened carefully through a couple of verses until he was certain of the refrain, then started singing, so softly only Diana could hear. The words were those of an old love song, and for Apollo and Diana the song ended in a kiss. Morgan and Arzigal, both smiling indulgently, pretended not to notice.

An angry feminine voice drew their attention briefly, as Lieutenant Freya verbally assaulted a shy-looking, sandy-haired man who hovered at her elbow while she tried to talk to several other pilots. "You insufferable little... If you don't leave me alone and stop following me around everywhere like a lovesick daggit pup, I... I swear by all that's holy I'm going to loose Clem on you!"

As Freya's shy but obviously persistent admirer, looking just a bit green, re-treated hastily, Apollo asked, "Who -- or rather, what -- is Clem?"

Morgan grinned. "Pray you never have the opportunity to meet her, Apollo, at least not without Freya's protection. Clem's a sentiological bast -- supposedly -- from the planet Byzel, and I think she's at least semi-sentient. But ask Arion about her some time..." He struggled to suppress further laughter, remembering a drunken Arion's one late-night encounter with the strange being known as Clem.

Then Commander Christopher and Major Meret arrived, but their presence did nothing to dampen the enthusiasm of the party. In fact, they joined willingly, and soon everyone forgot a battlestar commander was present. After a brief stop to greet the guest of honour -- and to be sure Apollo really was fully recovered -- Christopher wandered off to join the pyramid game, and the tiny, blonde Meret disappeared into the crowd.

"There he is!" a voice shouted triumphantly from somewhere in the room, and suddenly two more than slightly inebriated young women, whom Morgan identified for Apollo as Lieutenant Trav and Sergeant Alexandra, both from Diana's Purple Squadron, darted past, waving what looked suspiciously like...water lasers? The women simultaneously took aim at Sergeant Arion, thoroughly drenching him with strongly perfumed water.

"Oh, my Lord," Diana laughed. "Alex must've gotten someone to doctor Trav's drink again! Maybe I should..."

"No, let them be," Apollo interrupted. "After all, this is a party..."

Just then, Trav "missed" her target, deliberately squirting the Executive Officer, Colonel Arsenaux. He promptly seized the water laser, grabbed Trav, and hauled her from the room. From the expression on his face, his "vengeance" would be very sweet indeed.

Arion, meanwhile, was howling in outrage. Cassandra grabbed him and hauled him out.

Apollo was nearly choking with laughter when Alexandra, truly by accident, hit Morgan with a stream of scented water. The telepath didn't react visibly, didn't even flinch, but the pretty brown-haired Sergeant suddenly found herself in the middle of a very localised shower -- right in the centre of the Officers' Club. As she squelched away, wringing out the dripping hem of her dress and trying to figure out what had happened, Morgan leaned back in his seat, clasped his hands behind his head, and smiled innocently.

None of his companions was the least bit fooled.

Diana glared. Apollo tried desperately not to laugh out loud.

"Morgan," Arzigal whispered nervously, "do you really think you should...?"

Morgan's smile broadened. He looked inordinately pleased with himself, but he didn't say a word. He knew that, aside from his three companions, the Com-

mander, and possibly Sergeant Jones, no one would ever suspect the truth. Alexandra's sudden dousing would remain an unsolved mystery.

Watching Morgan, Apollo was suddenly reminded of Starbuck...

Diana leaned toward him. "It's not quite like the GALACTICA, is it?" she asked, noting his wistful expression.

Apollo started, but recovered quickly. "No, not quite," he answered slowly. "The mood's different, somehow, and the people..." Suddenly he grinned mischievously. "Good thing, too, because if this were the GALACTICA..." His voice dropped to an almost inaudible whisper, and his words -- an interesting proposition, really -- made Diana blush.

"Apollo!" She tried to sound indignant, but failed miserably as his hand toyed with the wispy silk at her shoulder, then brushed lightly across the satiny skin, and her mock-indignation dissolved into a giggle.

Morgan glanced at Arzigal, raised an eyebrow, and smiled as if to say, "Let's humour the children, shall we?" The Hsarri smiled back, but said nothing.

Suddenly a strange apparition loomed over the table. The big man considered the four of them a bit blearily, mumbled something, then disappeared into the crowd. His words were peculiar. "Hmmm. All still with us. Interesting."

Apollo stared after the retreating figure. "Am I seeing things? I could swear..."

"Seeing things?" Diana echoed teasingly.

"Uh-huh. Something green...and glowing... I haven't had that much to drink." He hesitated. "Have I?"

The others laughed, and Diana tried to explain. "It's all right, you're not seeing things," she told him. "Well, not exactly, anyway. It's just Thing, or really Little Thing. Thing's bigger. Besides, Little Thing's the one that drinks -- I think. And Sergeant Jones, of course."

"That's Sergeant Jones? Wasn't he...? Thing?"

"Thing's an energy being," Morgan chuckled. "Some of the astrosurvey techs found it and got it into a bottle somehow, and they keep it around for a mascot. It's non-sentient, just sits there -- most of the time, anyway."

Apollo shook his head. "An energy being -- in a bottle? How in Hades...?"

"Don't even ask. No one admits to knowing. Anyhow, one day Thing got out of its bottle, somehow found Jones... We think a drunken tech tried to drink it... Well, next thing anyone knew, Thing was back in its bottle; Little Thing -- we think Thing fissioned or something -- had taken up residence with Jones; and every now and then, when he's had a few drinks, Jones develops a sort of weird green, uh, halo..."

"But why call the thing, uh, 'Thing'?"

Morgan laughed helplessly. "Captain, you know astrosurvey -- those techs are never any good at names!"

"I still don't believe..."

"Believe it, Apollo. Jones is strange, perhaps, but it's just possible none of us would be here without him. He's the piper."

"The piper..." Apollo mused. "I remember..."

He never finished what he was going to say, because just then Ananke began to sing again, and a hush fell over the room. Diana leaned her head against Apollo's shoulder once more, and he rested his cheek against her hair, smiling faintly. Morgan slipped an arm around Arzigal's shoulders, and after a moment's hesitation she relaxed against him. A mood of cheerful contentment spread over all of them.

It couldn't last. Apollo wasn't strong enough yet for centars of merrymaking. When he almost collapsed as he got to his feet to acknowledge a toast, he decided he'd had enough. He was staggering a little when he and Diana finally managed to slip away.

"Are you all right?" Diana asked in concern as he steadied himself against a wall.

"Fine, just a little lightheaded. I'm afraid I'm not used to all this. It's been a long time."

"Too long," she remarked, putting an arm around his waist.

He took her in his arms. "Too long, indeed," he murmured, kissing her forehead. His arms tightened around her, and what began as a simple expression of affection quickly became something far more passionate. Apollo's right hand slid down Diana's back, as the fingers of his left twined themselves in her hair. Her arms went around his neck, and she clung to him fiercely.

"Oh, Lords, how I love you!" Apollo whispered, his voice a sigh in her ear.

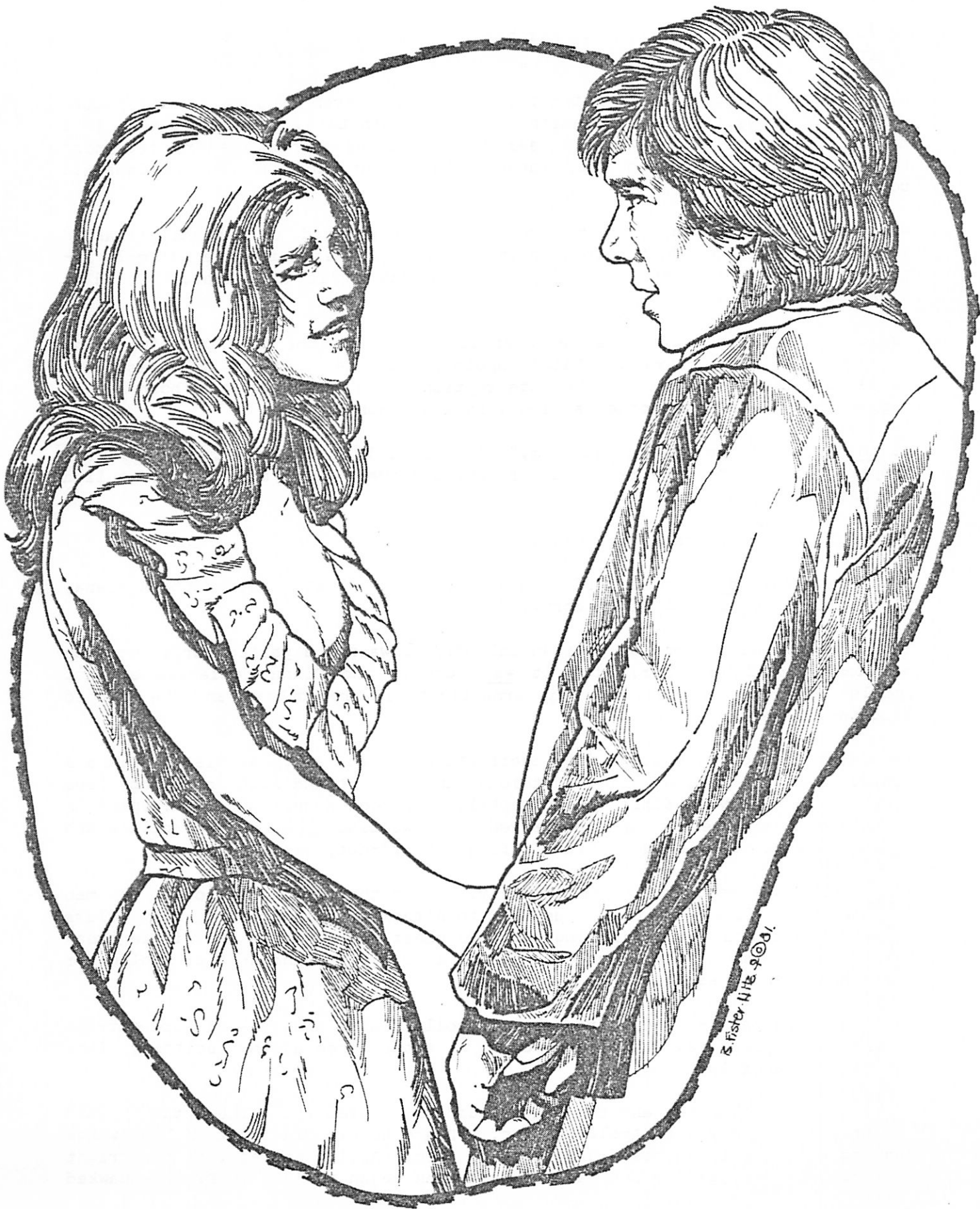
"Apollo..."

The sudden blaring of an alert klaxon startled them. Warrior-trained, they reacted instinctively, Apollo cursing quietly as he released Diana, and Diana kicking off her high-heeled sandals to sprint barefoot for the launch bay in a flurry of silk.

Then Diana stopped in mid-stride and began to laugh. Apollo, who'd dashed past her, turned and stared at her as if she'd lost her mind.

"You can tell we're both Warriors," she managed to gasp. "And neither one of us is on duty! It's not a general alert, and we don't have to..."





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Apollo grinned and reached for her hand. "Then let's not interrupt what we started."

A handful of Cylons was no match for the OSIRIS, even if some of her pilots were a bit tipsy. Orange Squadron, under Captain Laia, demolished them in a matter of centons, then went in search of other enemy ships before returning to the battlestar. When they landed, Laia contacted her Purple Squadron counterpart.

When Diana finally answered the com, she was wrapped in a hastily-grabbed sheet, and Laia couldn't help giggling as she apologised for the untimely interruption. "I just thought you'd like to know we're all clear. I had no idea you weren't..."

Out of sight of the scanner screen, Apollo lounged on the bed, grinning as he listened to the two women. Laia's apology, and her obvious embarrassment, tempered Diana's outrage at the interruption, and soon they were both laughing. Then, with yet another apology, Laia was gone.

"I told you not to answer the com," Apollo said as Diana returned to him, dropping her sheet. He regarded her appreciatively for a moment, then pulled her back into his arms.

"It might have been the Commander..."

"And what would he have said if he'd seen you like this? 'Why, Captain Diana, I do believe you're out of uniform...'"

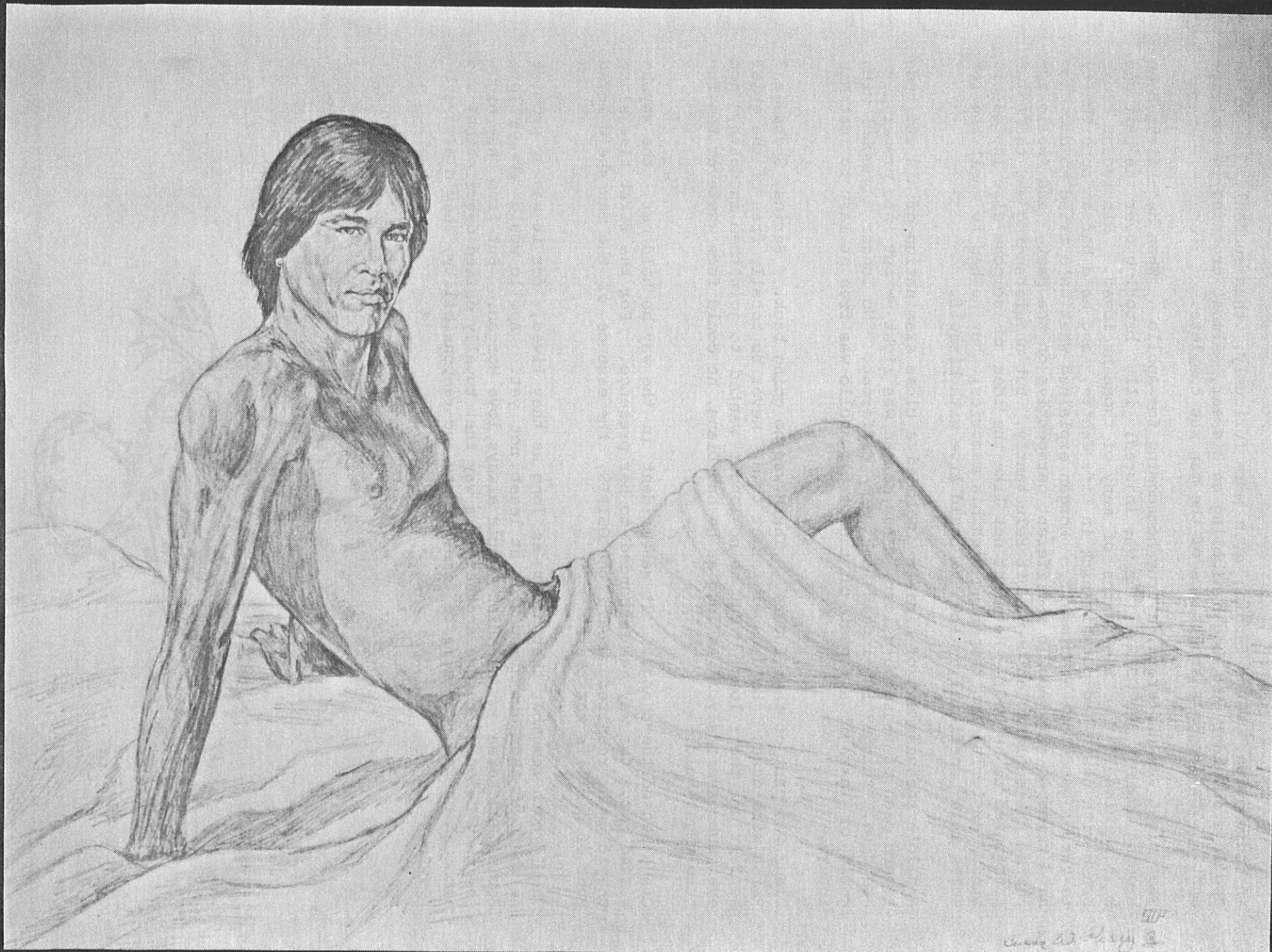
The imitation of a pompous, puritanical officer wasn't a particularly good one of Commander Christopher, but it was funny, and Diana collapsed against Apollo, laughing helplessly. His arms tightened around her, and she stopped laughing as he kissed her.

The faint whir of tiny wings drew their attention at last, as Draco, Diana's miniature violet dragon, flew in through an air vent and began circling above them. The highly empathic flying reptile had been accustomed to sleeping in Diana's quarters before Apollo arrived. It willingly shared her pillow and seemed to approve of Morgan, Diana's frequent off-duty visitor.

But Apollo was another matter entirely. What the dragon sensed in the man had, at their first meeting, caused it to attack in full draconic fury, claws drawing blood and flame singeing Apollo's chest and arms as the little creature dove at him. Then Draco disappeared into a vent, and neither Apollo nor Diana had seen it since.

Now Draco was back -- and it remembered Apollo. With a shriek of pure outrage at the man's presence, the dragon dove to attack once again, spitting flame and hissing angrily.

But Apollo had changed, and the dragon suddenly sensed it. The attack halted abruptly in mid-dive, as Apollo sat up. Draco hovered in front of him, wings fanning wildly only inches from the man's face. Apollo stared into the bright unwinking black eyes for several microns, then began to laugh. Draco squawked



in indignation, wings fanning even more furiously, then suddenly landed on Apollo's shoulder and began nibbling on his ear, almost crooning in contentment. The dragon's acceptance of the man was complete.

That night was different, a true homecoming for Apollo. When he'd first been brought aboard the OSIRIS, he was injured, ill, brooding over the past and blaming himself for the deaths of many of those he loved. His recent close brush with death had put him back in Life Centre, and he'd had an opportunity to take a good look at himself. Morgan explained what he'd tried to do, how he'd tried to give Apollo a different perspective on the past, and Apollo accepted the explanation -- a bit reluctantly, but understanding why the telepath acted as he had. He might not like the idea of someone else inside his mind, exploring and tampering with his memories; but he had to admit the results were beneficial. Now, he could live with himself.

Apollo's reassessment of himself included a close examination of his attitude toward each of those he'd lost. And Morgan was right -- put into proper perspective, things did indeed look very different. No longer obsessed with guilt or fear of a repeat of the past, Apollo was free at last to meet his future.

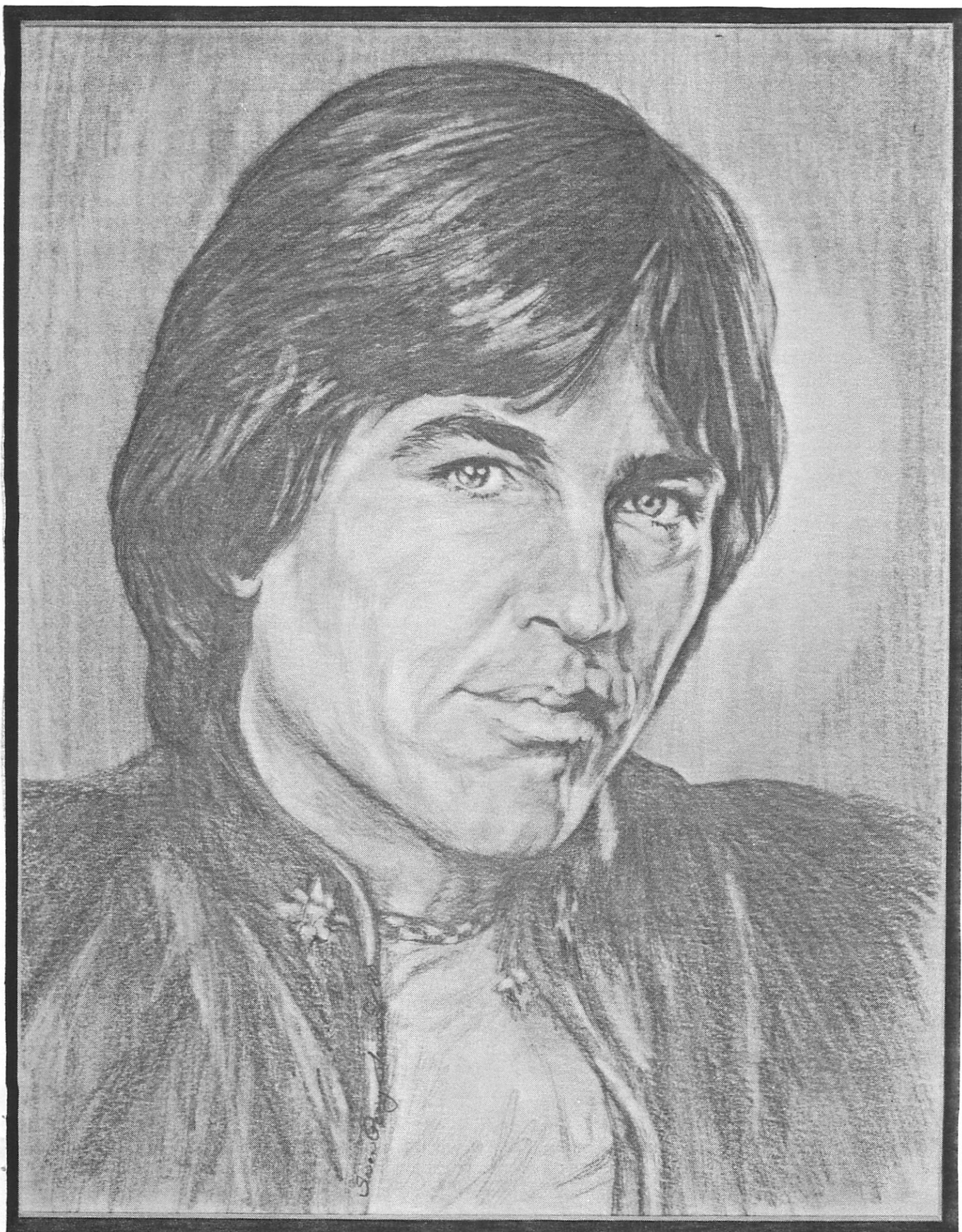
Diana was part of that future. There was no going back. Serina, Sheba, and Reisa were dead. He'd never forget them, never be totally free of the grief he felt at their loss. But he no longer wanted to join them in death, not even subconsciously. As long as he had Diana, he could face whatever the future might hold.

Diana sensed the change. It was evident in the way he held her, the way he kissed her, the way he responded to her presence. For the first time since they'd been reunited aboard the OSIRIS, the essence of the man she'd loved most of her life was there.

They'd both remember that night as long as they lived, for it was a promise neither of them dared speak, at least not yet. Apollo would always love Serina and Reisa -- and Diana would always love Morgan. But from that night on, they belonged to one another in a way that totally defied description, and although parted from time to time by duty and responsibility, they'd always be together.







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